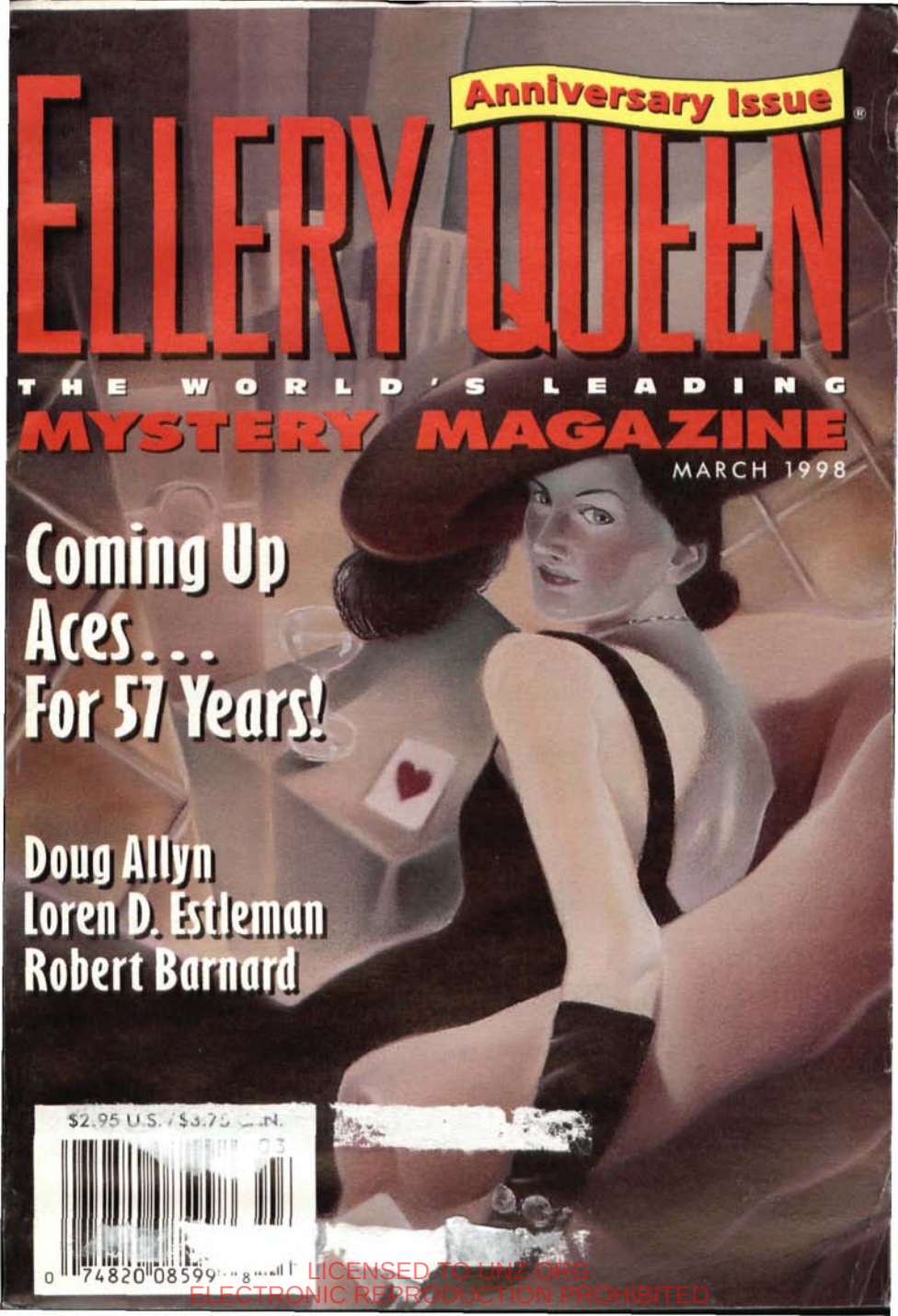

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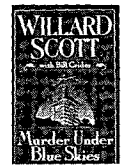

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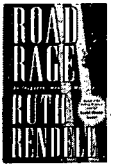

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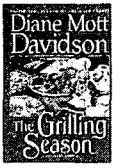

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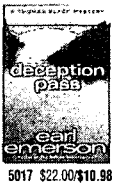

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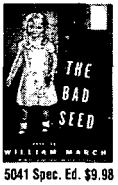

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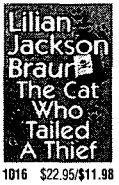

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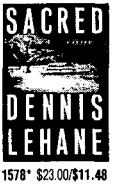

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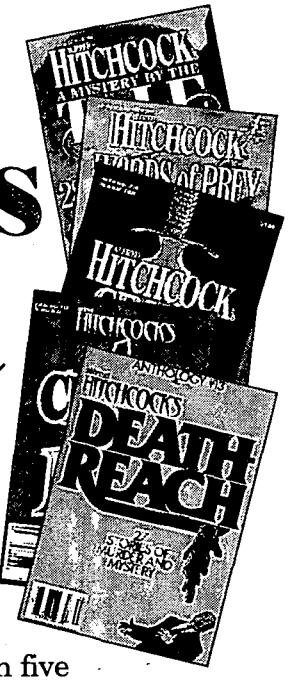

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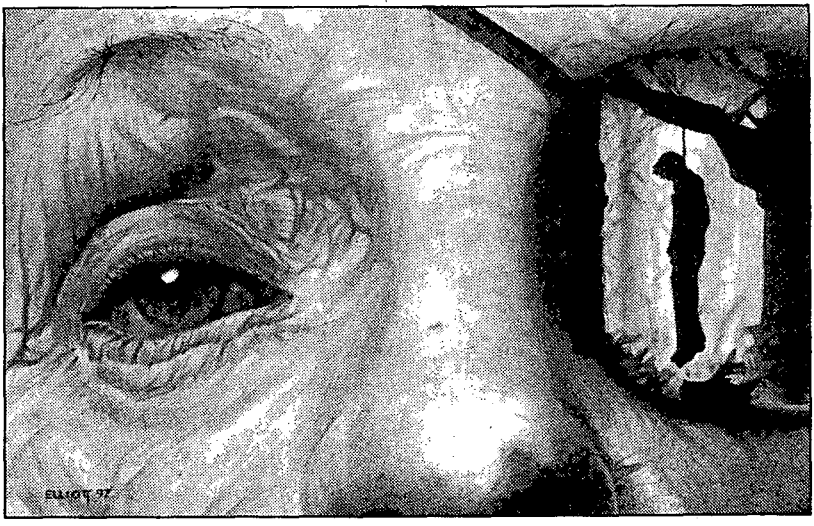

Art by Darryl Elliott

CEDAR SAVAGE

by Doug Allyn

Curt eased his battered pickup truck off on the shoulder of the road, checking both ways as he did so.

"All clear," he said quietly. "There's a car parked back there a ways, though."

"It was here earlier," Jack Lamotte said. "It ain't about nothin', probably broke down. You get the dogs out, gimme their leads, then get the truck out of here. There's a turnoff about a quarter-mile ahead. Turn down Grissom Road, pull into the trees out of sight, then hotfoot it back here. When I seen the bear, he was movin' through that copse o' cedars over there. I got a piece of fur he lost on some bob wire when he raided Colfax's sheep pen. I'll set the dogs on his scent and head 'em in before anybody spots us. Think you can catch us up in the dark?"

"No problem," Curt said. "Uncle Jack? Be sure to keep a tight hold of Brummie. When he gets excited—"

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"Boy, I was runnin' bear dogs before you was a shine in your mama's eye," Jack snapped. "I may be short a pin or two but I ain't ripe for no rockin' chair yet. You just try to catch us up before your hounds tree that rogue or I'll feed your share of the bounty money to your dogs."

"Don't worry, I'll catch up," Curt said, piling out of the truck. He quickly released the gates of the kennels built onto the pickup bed, solid, well-insulated doghouses that kept the hounds comfortable even on long trips in winter weather.

A treat for fans of veterinarian sleuth Dr. David Westbrook: In 1999 Crippen & Landru will be publishing a collection of the best Westbrook tales, tentatively entitled *All Creatures Dark and Dangerous*. We'll provide more details as we have them. In the meantime, the author has a new novel out. See *A Dance in Deep Water* (St. Martin's Press). ¶

The two Walker hounds leapt out of their cages to the ground, eighty pounds of lean musculature and floppy ears, tails up, eyes alight, wired up and ready for the hunt. Trooper immediately sat at Curt's feet like the soldier he was named for, but Brummie danced around with excitement before he let Curt snap on his lead.

Curt handed the leashes to Jack. The older man showed the hounds the bit of black bear fur, then led them across the drainage ditch into the trees. Curt watched them go, shaking his head.

Jack was dressed for the woods in an old green army jacket, corduroys, and logger's boots. He moved surefootedly for a man minus an arm, an eye, and most of one leg, but Curt thought his limp seemed more pronounced than usual. Probably needed to get his prosthesis refitted again. Problem was, Jack hated V.A. hospitals. Claimed to be afraid they'd whack off his other arm and give it to some wet-eared second louie.

Jack glared back over his shoulder, spotted Curt watching him, and angrily waved him off. Right. Time to go.

Curt scrambled back into his pickup truck, gunned it along the shoulder of the road to the turnoff, and concealed it well back in the trees. It was the spring of the year and nothing in northern Michigan was in season, so any DNR officer who spotted a truck with dog crates aboard would immediately get suspicious.

Keeping to the shadows at the edge of the woods, Curt trotted

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back toward the cedars where Jack had disappeared. His boots sank into the moist leaf mould of the swamp as he ran. The spongy soil made the footing tricky, but it also made tracking Jack and the two bear hounds a snap.

Curt overtook his uncle about seventy yards into the trees. Jack Lamotte was keeping pace with the dogs, but he'd been paying a steep price. His face was ashen, slicked with sweat. When Curt took the leads from him he didn't protest.

"They're actin' birdy," Jack panted. "Bear can't be more'n a hundred yards ahead or so."

"Damn, we're still awfully close to the road if the bastard decides to tree around here," Curt said.

"Gunshots in the swamp roll like thunder," Jack said. "Nobody can tell where they came from. We'll be all right. You just think on your half of the bounty money, plus if his hide's half decent it'll fetch another three hundred, maybe more."

Brummie suddenly lunged at the end of his leash as though he'd been hit with a cattle prod. "Yawp! Yawp!"

"Turn 'em loose!" Jack hissed. "Mr. bear's gotta be right ahead of us in them trees."

"I can't see nothin'," Curt said, unleashing the hounds. And then it was too late for talk. He sprinted after his dogs, leaving Jack to follow along as best he could.

Curt switched on his flashlight, hoping they were far enough from the road so it wouldn't be seen. The penalties for poaching were severe, but crashing into a five-hundred-pound rogue black bear in the dark could cost a man a helluva lot more than money.

He could hear the dogs singing now, yelping excitedly ahead. Their tones told Curt they had their prey in sight. No sounds of combat yet. Maybe the bear had treed.

He glimpsed a flash of Brummie's rump forty yards or so ahead but as he picked up his pace to overtake the dogs their barking suddenly trailed off. What the hell? The hounds had to be on top of the damned bear, but they weren't growling or snapping. And he still couldn't hear any sounds from the bear.

A giant pine tree loomed out of the mist. Surrounded by a circle of smaller cedars, the clearing was defensible turf, a perfect spot for a bear to turn at bay. He could either climb the huge pine or make his stand with the tree at his back and fight the dogs one on one as they came at him. And if he was as big as Jack thought, he could kill both dogs faster than a bat could blink.

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With his throat on fire and his heart hammering a drumbeat of fear and excitement, Curt burst through the outer ring of cedars into the pine clearing. The dogs were leaping and snapping at the air and each other, crazed with excitement, primed for combat. But there was no bear for them to fight.

In the shadowed clearing, it took Curt a moment to realize what the dogs were jumping at. A body. A man was hanging from a short piece of rope tied to a lower bough of the giant pine, twisting slowly in the dusk.

For a moment Curt thought the swaying man might still be alive, but one glimpse of his purpled, distorted features blew that idea. The corpse was only moving because the dogs were nipping at its pantlegs.

"Holy Mary, Mother of God," Curt breathed. "What the hell is this?"

The dog standing on the examination table seemed to be in good physical shape. An eighty-pound, flop-eared Walker hound, four years old with his reproductive system still intact.

Frowning, Dr. David Westbrook gently ran his hands over the hound's flanks, checking for tumors or hidden abrasions. Zip. Zero. Nada. The hound's coat had a glossy sheen, no fleas, no scars, and his tail was wagging slowly, which, in a bear dog, is an encouraging sign. Bred for ferocity and scenting ability, bear dogs could be a handful sometimes. But all in all, this hound looked like a healthy, happy camper.

His owner was another matter. Curt Lamotte was as jumpy as a field mouse in a frying pan. His dark eyes kept darting around the veterinarian's office as though he was scouting out escape routes.

Curt was at least twenty, but he seemed younger. Maybe it was his sparse beard. Like a lot of Algoma natives, Curt was of French and Ojibwa stock, dark hair and eyes, aquiline features, and scarcely enough stubble to warrant a shave every third day.

"Your dog looks healthy as a horse, Curt," David said, mussing the hound's ears. "If more of my clients cared for their animals the way you do, I'd be out of business. So why are you wasting my time?"

"What do you mean?" Curt asked, swallowing.

"You're too good a hand with hounds, Curt. You don't need a vet to tell you Brummie here's in the pink. So what's on your mind?"

"I just . . . needed to talk to you alone is all, Doc."

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"I'll be breaking for lunch soon. I can meet you over at Tubby's if you like."

"No, I can't risk bein' seen. Look, you're pretty good friends with the sheriff, right? I mean, I see you guys havin' breakfast together most mornings at the cafe."

"Stan and I share a table now and again," David admitted. "Calling us friends is a bit of a stretch. What about the sheriff?"

"I need you to talk to him for me."

"About what? Look, Curt, I don't want to be rude, but I've got other patients waiting—"

"It's about a body," Curt blurted out. "We, ah—me and Brummie come on a body last night. In the swamp along Cullen Creek."

"A . . . human body, you mean?"

"Yeah." Curt nodded, swallowing. "Hangin' from a big white pine with a bunch of cedars around it."

"I see," David said, though he really didn't. "Do you know who it was?"

"I knew him, yeah. He's a shirttail relation of mine, second or third cousin. One of the Cadarette brothers. Norman. He's a couple years younger than me. It was hard to be sure at first. His face . . ." Curt swallowed hard. "His face was so swole up I couldn't hardly recognize him."

"But you're sure—yeah, of course you're sure he was dead," David said, answering his own question. "Look, I don't understand, Curt. Why are you telling me about this?"

"Because I can't go to the law, Doc. We was poachin' in there, huntin' outa season. I can't afford no fines, and anyway, the DNR will seize my dogs. I raised them dogs up from pups. I don't wanna lose 'em."

"So you want me to tell Stan about this? How the hell am I supposed to explain it?"

"I don't know. Tell him somebody called you, kinda anonymous like. I'd call him myself but I seen on TV where cops can tell who you are from your voice or somethin'. Please, Doc, you gotta help me out." Curt's voice was quavering, close to breaking. "Remember, you owe me one."

"Yeah, I guess I do at that," David conceded. A few years earlier, David had skidded his Jeep off an icy back road into a deep ditch. If Curt hadn't spotted the overturned vehicle and stopped to haul him out, he might have drowned or frozen.

"Okay, okay," David said. "I'll talk to Stan for you and I'll do my

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level best to keep you out of it. Fair enough?"

"More'n fair, Doc," Curt said, nodding gratefully. "I know you'll do what you can. I appreciate it."

"You'd just better hope we don't both end up in jail. Now, tell me about this body."

"It's back in the swamp near the creek. We went in maybe fifty, sixty yards west of the water. Norm's car was parked by the road there, but I didn't think nothin' of it, figured he was outa gas or broke down or somethin'. I set Brummie and Trooper on a bear trail and I followed 'em in. They started yawpin' and I figured they mighta treed the bear, but they'd come on ol' Norm's body instead. It's not far off the road. There's a path fishermen use along the creek. If you follow it back about a hundred yards you can spot that big pine easy. You can't hardly miss it."

"Famous last words," David grumbled.

"Damn!" David's foot sank into the peaty muck halfway up his ankle. Naturally, his Weejun loafer came off when he tried to pull his foot free and he wound up dancing a one-legged jig as he fumbled in the mud trying to rescue his shoe. The chill swamp water cut at his ankles like a dull hacksaw.

"Watch your step there, Doc," Stan Wolinski said, not bothering to conceal a grin. "It's a tad damp out here." The sheriff could afford to be smug. He was wearing a pair of rubber barn Wellingtons he'd hauled out of the patrol car's trunk as soon as he'd realized where they were going. Stan was a sawed-off fireplug of a man, square-shouldered and square-faced. His hair was going prematurely gray but he still saw the world in stark shades of black and white. A man without nuances. Only a slightly off-center sense of humor saved him from being a total stick.

"Wet feet are healthy," David grated. "Cold water stimulates the circulation. That should be the tree up ahead, the big white pine with the cedars around it."

"Should be?" Wolinski snorted. "Be a whole lot simpler if whoever it was came along to show us himself. Especially if this turns out to be a wild-goose chase."

David didn't bother to answer. He picked up his pace, pushing through the huddle of cedars surrounding the huge old pine.

It was definitely the right tree. The ring of cedars formed a sort of woodland amphitheater, ringing the thick-boled pine like acolytes around an ancient priest. The pine's gnarled limbs were

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raised to the heavens in supplication. And a body was hanging from one of its lower branches by a short length of clothesline.

Norm Cadarette? Maybe. The corpse's bulging features were too distorted for David to be sure. It could have been anyone. He was wearing a loden green and black checkered overcoat and torn jeans, but half the population of Algoma wore similar clothing this time of year, men and women alike.

Stan whistled softly as he moved past. He circled the body slowly, looking it over carefully. Then he knelt, examining the ground near the corpse.

"Looks like he stepped up on this busted cedar stump, then kicked it away," Stan said grimly. "And now I'm gonna have to tell his folks what happened. God, sometimes I hate this job, you know that? I really hate it."

"Why would he . . . do a thing like this?"

"Who knows why young people do anything these days?" Stan snapped, rising. "Christ, when I got outa high school our big career options were gettin' shipped to Vietnam or runnin' to Canada. Kids today aren't facing anything nearly that bad. You'd think life would look pretty good to 'em. Instead, the suicide rate keeps goin' up. Damn it to hell."

Spotting the boy's wallet and shoes at the edge of the clearing, Stan trudged over to them, knelt, and riffled through the wallet. "Norman Cadarette," he said. "Twenty-three freakin' years old."

"Did you know him?"

"I know his whole damn family. Cedar savages. Work in the woods, trap some, do a little hardscrabble farmin'. Good folks for the most part. Work hard, pay their bills on time. Might get a little hammered of a Saturday night and bust up a backwoods tavern or maybe poach a deer out of season for meat, but otherwise they're not much trouble."

"Why do the locals call them cedar savages?"

Stan glanced at him. "Can't say I ever gave it much thought. I suppose it's because they work at loggin' or peelin' cedar posts, they don't wear ties, and their fingernails aren't always clean. I thought young Norman here might turn out a bit different, though. He was real bright in school. Won a scholarship to attend Westover College. Chemistry, I think."

"What happened?"

"Flunked out. Couldn't make the adjustment to college life. Too many buildings, too many girls, not enough hills or piney woods

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around. So instead of graduating and going on to a good job, he ends up decorating a lonesome pine. Sweet Jesus."

David glanced around the clearing. The grass was trampled down pretty thoroughly, probably by Curt's dogs. The stump Norm had stood on had fallen on its side. It seemed like a sorry way to die. He wondered if Norm had accepted the death he'd sought, or if he'd fought the rope at the end and tried to claw his way upward for one last gasp of air.

David stepped back for a breath of air himself. The boy's bowels had voided in his final moments and the stench was potent when the breeze caught it just right. There was another scent mixed in with it too, something vaguely familiar that gave David a momentary flashback to his own college days. His dorm room, late at night. The image flickered a moment, and then passed. No sense to it.

The boy apparently hadn't struggled much. His hands were reddened by lividity as his blood settled in his lower extremities, but they were otherwise unmarked. If he'd been doing manual labor in the woods, he'd been damned careful about it. His hands looked as soft as a girl's, except . . .

For his right wrist. There was a line around it. Curious, David moved around the body to check the other wrist. A similar mark. Not a scar, a narrow bruise line. He'd seen it often on animals that had been tied too tightly. A rope burn.

Uneasy now, he knelt by the cedar stump at the boy's feet. Several broken branch stubs were sticking out of the stump, smeared with dark loam where they'd punctured the ground when the stump had been kicked away. But there were too many marks. The ground around the stump was dotted with a half-dozen of them at least.

"Stan? Check this out, will you?"

Frowning, the sheriff carefully replaced the boy's wallet where he'd found it and joined David beside the body. "Check what out?"

"Look at the ground. Those marks."

"Where the stump dug in, you mean?" Stan said, kneeling to examine the wounded earth more carefully. He traced the gouges in the soil with his blunt fingertips, then touched one of the broken branch spikes on the stump. And when he glanced up, his square face was transformed into his cop mask. Unreadable.

"What the hell is this?" he asked evenly.

"I'm not sure. It looks like that stump was kicked over a number of times. And his wrists have rope burns on them. Maybe he tied

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himself up to be sure he couldn't change his mind."

"And then he jumped off the stump a half-dozen times?" Stan asked acidly. "And then untied his wrists and tossed the cord away while he was dancing on air? And where's that rope now? I don't see it, do you?"

David shook his head.

"I think it's time to tell me who told you about this body, Doc."

"Stan, he had nothing to do with this. I'm sure of that."

"That's not good enough, Doc, not anymore. I think we may be lookin' at a homicide here, so all bets are off. I want his name. You're a veterinarian so you can't be protecting any doctor-patient confidentiality. Unless somebody's cat told you Norm was out here."

"Stan, I gave him my word."

"Damn it, Doc—" Stan turned away, visibly controlling his anger. "All right," he said, facing David again. "You gave him your word, now I'll give you mine. I'll have to call a state police evidence team out here. It'll take 'em an hour to get here from Lansing, maybe two or three hours more to go over the scene and remove the body. Let's say four hours tops. Then I'll be heading back to my office. And when I get there, I want to see you and your anonymous informant waiting for me."

"But—"

"No buts. Either bring him in or bring your toothbrush along, Doc. Because you'll be a guest of the county until you produce your Mr. X. Do we understand each other?"

David nodded.

"Good. I'll stay here to protect the site," Stan said, taking a cell phone from a clip on his belt. "So why don't you go round up your witness and try not to trample any evidence on your way back to your Jeep."

Leaving Stan in the clearing, David made his way out of the swamp. He didn't retrace his steps to the path along the creek they'd followed in, though. Instead, he scouted around until he picked up the paw prints of Curt's dogs.

He was no Daniel Boone, but it wasn't difficult to follow the dog tracks in the moist ground. The trail came out only twenty or thirty yards from the banks of Cullen Creek, not far from Norm's abandoned car.

He spent a few minutes casting about the area looking for more signs, but didn't find any. From the position of Norm's car, he'd taken the same route the dogs had to that clearing. Had he been

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alone? No way to be sure now. But one thing was obvious: There were too many tracks, dogs and humans alike. Cursing softly, David climbed into his Jeep, fired it up, and drove angrily back to Algoma. He pulled into the lot at Shaeffer's garage and stalked around back to the service area.

Curt Lamotte was dressed in brown canvas coveralls, leaning over the fender of a Ford Taurus. He glanced up at David's approach but his smile of greeting faded fast.

"We have to talk," David said, grasping Curt's bicep and leading him to a shadowed corner of the garage.

"What's wrong?" Curt asked. "Did you find him?"

"We found him easily enough, Curt, but things didn't happen exactly the way you told me, did they? For openers, you weren't on that hunt alone. There were other tracks mixed in with yours. And worse, your friend Norman may not have committed suicide at all."

"I don't understand. I—"

"And lastly," David said, cutting him off, "you weren't even straight with me about the dogs. Brummie couldn't have found that body."

"Sure he did, him and Trooper both. They led me right to it."

"Did they? Funny, I thought they were good bear dogs, the best in the county, some say."

"They are!"

"Then why did they lead you to the body, Curt? You said you were after a rogue bear, right? One that had been killing sheep? Well, I checked around that clearing. I'm no woodsman, but that ground's so soft a field mouse would leave tracks, to say nothing of a five-hundred-pound bear. There weren't any bear tracks near that clearing. And if the dogs had really been on a bear's spoor, they wouldn't have left it to go check out that body any more than they'd go running off after a rabbit or a squirrel. They're bear dogs. Scent hounds. Once they're on a trail, they stay on it. So if they led you to that body, then they must have been looking for it."

"I swear that's not how it was."

"No? Then maybe you'd better tell me how it was, Curt. If you were after a bear, how did the dogs pick up its scent? Where were its tracks?"

"I—don't know. It was dark. I didn't actually see its spoor."

"But you knew it was there? Who said so? Who really set your dogs on the scent?"

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Curt hesitated, then released a long, ragged breath. "My Uncle Jack," he said quietly. "He come to my place yesterday afternoon. Said ol' man Colfax, the one with the big dairy farm, had offered him bounty money to take a bear."

"Why?"

"Colfax told him he'd been losin' sheep to a rogue bear but the DNR wouldn't issue him a nuisance permit to kill it. So he offered Uncle Jack two hundred bucks to get rid of the bear on the sly, like. Jack's got no dogs, so he offered me half the money if I'd help him out."

"And your uncle put them on the scent? How, exactly?"

"He had a little chunk of fur. Said he got it off a bob-wire fence where one of the sheep was killed. He let the dogs sniff it and they went off like rockets into the swamp, noses to the ground. They knew what they were doin'."

"But you never actually saw the bear's trail?"

"No, it was dark and it was all I could do to keep up with them dogs. And they led me right to Norman."

"And were they excited?"

"How do you mean?"

"Were they birdy? Yawping and jumping around?"

"Sure they were. You know how they get when they've . . . found what they're after." His voice died away, as though the import of his words had just registered.

"And where was your Uncle Jack while all this was going on? Could he have led the dogs to the spot?"

"No way. He was way back behind us. He's only got one arm and half a leg, got blown damn near in half over in Vietnam. He gets around pretty good, but he's kinda slow, you know? Me and them dogs was probably at that clearin' a good five minutes before Jack caught up to us."

"I see," David said. "Then he must have known the body was there beforehand."

"He couldn't have," Curt said. "The dogs led me to it, Doc. You think he whispered in their ears, told 'em where it was hangin'? He showed 'em a chunk of bear fur and that was it. Look, I'll talk to the sheriff, I can see where I'll have to now, dogs or no dogs, but I need to keep my uncle clear of this, all right?"

"Why should you?" David said, exasperated. "He's the one who got you into this mess."

"Not on purpose, he didn't," Curt said stubbornly. "He wouldn't

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do me like that. But Uncle Jack ain't so good with people. Especially the law. He's had a lot of trouble in his life. I'll be damned if I'll set him up for any more."

"Curt, it's a murder investigation. You can't keep him out of it."

"But we didn't do nothin'! We were tryin' to take down a rogue bear the DNR should've handled, and I reported the body the best way I could. Why should we take the heat for doin' right? It ain't fair!"

"Okay, okay, calm down. The thing is, you can't lie to Stan without buying yourself a world of trouble, Curt. You'd better get hold of your uncle, and damned fast."

"I can't. He's got no phone and I can't just take off work to go chasin' out to his place. I'm barely hangin' onto this job as it is."

"All right, then, I'll talk to him," David snapped. "I'm the one in the jam here. Where does he live?"

"He's got a cabin way and the hell 'n' gone back of the Silver River swamp. You take the second dirt road past the bridge, follow it to the end. Nobody else lives out there."

"Will he be there now?"

"He's always there," Curt said glumly. "Livin' back in that swamp all busted up like he is, he ain't exactly no social butterfly, you know? And you be a little careful comin' up on him, okay? Like I said, he ain't so good with people."

"I'll keep it in mind," David said.

David found the dirt road that Curt had described with no trouble, but getting down it was another matter. After the first mile the trail narrowed to a rutted track barely wide enough for a single vehicle. If he'd been driving anything but his Jeep, he would have quit cold. The trail couldn't have been more than a few miles long, but it still took nearly half an hour to crawl back to Jack Lamotte's place in low gear.

The tiny cabin blended so naturally into the forest it seemed to be a part of it, as though it had sprouted and grown like a morel at the edge of the clearing. Perhaps it had, in a way. The log-framed, slab-sided building had probably been built from the pines that had been cut to clear the site.

Stacks of cedar logs stood in neat cords near the house. Some were peeled, but most still wore their hides. A sawhorse and a two-handed drawknife stood near a stack of skinned posts. Peeling cedars is the north country equivalent of a cottage industry.

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Loggers cut the posts to size then drop them off for local folks to shave to make fence posts or lawn furniture, one pickup truckload at a time. For ten cents a log.

Shadowed by the towering pines around it, the cabin looked deserted, its front door ajar, no lights showing inside. David eased warily out of his Jeep, remembering Curt's warning about his uncle.

"Mr. Lamotte? Jack Lamotte?"

A bearded figure dressed in overalls and a blue-black plaid shirt appeared in the shadow of the doorway.

"Who are you and what do you want?"

"I'm Dr. Westbrook, the veterinarian from Algoma. We have to talk. Your nephew Curt told me how to find you."

"I don't need no vet. Why'd Curt send you out here?"

"He didn't, exactly. I came on my own to keep Curt from buying himself a truckload of trouble by lying to Sheriff Wolinski about that body the two of you found last night."

Lamotte didn't react for a moment, then shook his head warily. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"I think you do. Curt told me what happened, Jack. He had the idea I could tip off Sheriff Wolinski about it and keep the two of you clear of it. I tried. It didn't work out."

"No? Why not?"

"Because that kid you found out there didn't commit suicide. Wolinski's fairly sure he was murdered, so you can forget about blowing this off, Mr. Lamotte. Wolinski gave me a couple of hours to produce my anonymous tipper. So here I am."

"I didn't tip you off about anything."

"True. And I can tell you up front that your nephew's all set to take the fall for you. He'll tell Wolinski he was poaching and found the body by himself. If you let him do it."

"He's old enough to vote. If he wants to do something that stupid, why shouldn't I let him?"

"Because I guessed Curt wasn't alone and so will Wolinski. Curt could end up in jail trying to cover for you and the law will come for you anyway. Look, I'm no cop but I do know dogs, and those two hounds wouldn't have found that body on their own."

"Why not?"

"Because Curt said you let them sniff a piece of fur and they led him straight to the body. The only way that could have happened would be if the fur and the body had a strong scent in common.

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I'm guessing you dusted it with something first. Something like amphetamines, right?"

Lamotte eyed him a moment without speaking. The older man was hawk-faced, with a coarse, salt-and-pepper beard. One eye was covered with a grubby black patch, but the other had a raptor's glint, shrewdly intelligent. "Maybe you'd better come in," he said at last.

Lamotte stood aside as David entered, or rather, he hobbled aside. Jack Lamotte's right leg ended just above the knee. His pant leg was pinned up and he was using a cane to steady himself. His left arm was missing altogether, the sleeve pinned up against his shoulder.

And yet he seemed far from helpless. And there were stacks of peeled cedar posts in the yard. David wondered how the hell a man could manage that kind of work with one arm. It was difficult enough with two.

The cabin's interior was a surprise. It was a crude, two-room affair with a rough pine floor, a dry sink, and a handmade table by its only window. An ancient cast-iron wood stove stood in one corner, and a small bedroom was partly concealed behind a trade blanket hanging over the door frame. A huge black bearskin decorated one wall, and yet the cabin looked more like a library than a backwoods hovel.

Handmade bookshelves rose floor to ceiling on three sides, filled with an eclectic mix of hardcovers and paperbacks. Shakespeare and Freud stood shoulder to shoulder with John O'Hara and John D. MacDonald, Alexander Pope and Marcus Aurelius, but the majority of the books were history titles, Civil War, World Wars One and Two. And Vietnam.

"You read a lot of history, do you?" David asked drily.

"When you get chopped up in a meat grinder, you get curious about who turned it on," Lamotte said. "Besides, I got no electricity out here, no radio or TV. It passes the time."

David crossed to the cast-iron wood stove, but despite the chill of the autumn afternoon, it was unlit. The room was as cold as Lamotte's unblinking stare. He left the front door ajar, standing in its shadow.

"How did you know about the speed?" Lamotte asked.

"I tried amphetamines in college. I was working two jobs, studying when I could, but speed wasn't much help. It doesn't matter much if you're wide awake in class if you're too wired up to

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remember your name. I caught a whiff of dust on Norm's body, but it didn't register until later. He must have been a heavy user for the dogs to find him so quickly."

"He was," Lamotte said. "He should have kept it that way."

"I don't follow you. What happened to him?"

"Reality happened to him, Doc. Norm was in the crank business. He started making it to feed his own habit and save a few bucks, you know? He put together a little lab in a shed behind his folks' farm and started cookin' up speed. Crystal methamphetamine, high-grade stuff. He was always a bright kid. Too bright, as it turned out."

"How so?"

"He realized that it wouldn't be much tougher to make a hundred pounds of the stuff than to make a few ounces. The chemicals are expensive, though, so he hooked up with a couple of dealers who offered to front him the money and take the meth off his hands when it was ready."

"And you were one of the investors?"

"Me? Hell no. I've got no money, and I don't screw around with drugs anyway. Saw too many friends get messed up on dope in Vietnam. Got a little messed up there myself," he added, indicating his empty pant leg.

"If you weren't involved, how did you know Norm was cooking crank?"

"I didn't know at the time, or I would've tried to stop him. He's my oldest sister's boy, but we were never close. When it comes to family, I'm kind of a black sheep, livin' out here the way I do. I hadn't seen Norm since he went off to college; then a few days ago, he showed up here and asked to use my place."

"Use it for what?"

"Neutral ground, to meet with the dopers he'd gotten involved with. He didn't want them coming around his folks' farm. My place is a little farther off the beaten track."

"I noticed. Who were the guys he was going to meet?"

"Norm just said they were a couple of studs he knew from college. He went to Westover a few semesters before he flunked out. He said they were a little . . . flaky. He was afraid they might try to cheat him."

"Apparently he was right."

"Maybe not," Lamotte said, looking away. "That's the hell of it. Maybe not."

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"What do you mean?"

"I may have screwed him up," Jack said, swallowing hard. "Norm asked me for a simple favor, to use my place. I was afraid if this deal went through there'd be no goin' back for him, that he'd get mixed in deeper and end up in prison. I did some time myself, once, right after I got back from 'Nam. I had a hard-on for the world in those days. Some guy messed with me in a bar, I cut him up for his troubles and wound up doin' five years in Jacktown. Prison's not somethin' I'd wish on anybody, especially a punk kid like Norm. So I talked him into lettin' me hide his stash, to make sure he wouldn't get ripped off. He could show 'em a sample and make sure they had his money. Then he could contact me at the local coffee shop, and we'd make the exchange someplace public. If they tried to muscle him it wouldn't work. He couldn't tell 'em anything since he wouldn't know where the stuff was himself, you follow?"

"Sounds logical as far as it goes."

"Norm thought so too. The problem was, he was worried about his thug buddies, but he thought he could trust me. Which was exactly backwards. Because I'm the one who shafted him."

"How?"

"I dumped the crank," Jack said simply. "As soon as he gave it to me, I drove out onto the marsh flats near the mouth of Cullen Creek and emptied it down a sinkhole. I figured I'd crash their meeting, tell them the crank was gone for good and to clear out or I'd set the law on 'em. But I never got the chance. When I got to Norm's place they were already gone. I headed back to town lookin' for 'em and spotted Norm's car by the side of the road. I guessed they took him back in the swamp to do a little persuadin'. I yelled, but nobody answered, but I still wasn't too worried. Figured they might have roughed him up, maybe left him out there to sweat. I never thought they'd . . ." He took a deep breath, collecting his thoughts. "He told me they were guys he knew from college. They must be majorin' in homicide. Did you see what they did to him?"

David nodded.

"I was afraid Norm might be out there hurt or tied up. I can't get around in the swamp too good on this one leg; I needed help. So I fed Curt a line about needin' his dogs to track a rogue bear. I'd kept one of the empty crank bags to prove it was gone. I let the dogs sniff a piece of it and they followed it straight to Norm."

"Why didn't you go to Sheriff Wolinski then?"

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"And tell him what? That my nephew got offed by a couple of college punks? I don't know their names or even what they look like. And I'm the crazy Vietnam vet with the prison record livin' back in the woods. A cedar savage. He'd bust me for Norm's death in a heartbeat. And he'd be right. It's my fault."

"No, it's not," David said quietly. "Maybe you could have handled it better, but you were trying to do the right thing by him. The question is, what are you going to do now? Wolinski expects me to show up with the guy who told me where to find Norm. Even if Curt dummies up, I won't let him take a fall for you. I'll have to tell Wolinski about you."

"Yeah, I expect you will."

"Then why not tell him yourself? He'll come for you anyway, Jack. It'd look better if you came in on your own. Stan Wolinski isn't always the easiest guy to get along with, but he's a fair man. He won't try to railroad you."

"You don't understand. I'm an ex-con and that puts me at the top of Wolinski's list whether he's honest or not. The last time I trusted my government it cost me an arm and a leg. I'm not interested in donatin' any more body parts. I got none to spare."

"Then what will you do?"

"I'll wait," he said quietly. "The way I figure it, those bastards strung Norm up, then kicked a log out from under him a half-dozen times trying to make him tell them about the stash. He couldn't tell 'em that because he didn't know where it was. But I expect one of those times when he was dangling from that damned rope tryin' for one last breath, he told 'em about me. I sure as hell would have in his place. And since they're still lookin' to score a crank stash, I figure they'll be along to talk to me any time now. So if I were you, Doc, I'd move along. You'd best be gone when they come."

"You shouldn't be here either. Look, no offense, but Norm was a strapping young guy and look how he ended up."

"Grown or not, Norm was a kid," Lamotte said evenly. "I haven't been a kid since a little Vietnamese girl tossed a grenade into my hooch back in seventy-one. Maybe I'm not what I was, but I can still handle myself. Don't worry about me."

"Have it your way then," David said. "What should I tell Wolinski? Are you going to give him any trouble when he comes for you?"

"I hope not," Lamotte said, smiling faintly for the first time. "I'm hopin' it'll be over by then, one way or the other. No hard

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feelin's either way, Doc. Thanks for tryin'."

"Yeah," David said. "Right. Good luck, Mr. Lamotte. I think you're going to need it." He trotted grimly out to his Jeep, fired it up, gunned it into a tight U-turn, and headed back out on the narrow track. The shadows in the swamp had lengthened in the time he'd spent in the shack. It was barely midafternoon, but the forest's leafy canopy dimmed the daylight to a muted green.

David reached for the headlight switch, but hesitated. He could have sworn he saw a faint flash of . . .

Light. Headlights. Flickering through the trees around a bend of the trail ahead. Someone was coming. He jammed on the brakes, skidding the Jeep to a halt. Maybe it was Wolinski. Could Curt have sent him out here?

Perhaps. But did he want to bet his life on that possibility? Not a chance. With no place to turn around, his only options were to blunder ahead or back up.

No choice. He jammed the Jeep into reverse and gunned it back along the trail as fast as he dared. Trees he'd barely noticed a moment before suddenly seemed to loom over the trail like sentries, clawing at the Jeep with skeletal branches as he passed. He risked a hasty glimpse down the track. The headlights were still coming on, definitely closer now, and moving one hell of a lot faster than he could drive in reverse. Damn it!

The cab clanged like an empty oil drum as David sideswiped a poplar sapling. Fighting the wheel, he managed to keep the Jeep on the trail, but he slowed down a little. Had to. If he hit something hard enough to jam up now . . .

Suddenly the gloom lifted a bit as the Jeep rocketed out of the woods into the clearing. David hastily parked the Jeep beside Lamotte's battered pickup truck, then piled out and sprinted for the shack while the Jeep was still rocking.

"Company's coming," he said, brushing past Lamotte into the cabin's dim interior. "It could be Wolinski, or maybe even Curt, but I don't think we can count on that. What should we do?"

"Do?" Lamotte echoed.

"Your plan," David snapped. "You were waiting for them, right? What did you intend to do when they showed up?"

"I figured Norm told 'em about me bein' crippled up, so I figured to sucker 'em in close enough to get off a shot. Havin' your Jeep out there'll probably blow that idea."

"A shot with what?" David said, glancing around wildly.

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"This." With a move almost too quick for the eye to follow, Jack reached behind his back and came out with a revolver, a small six-gun that looked like something a kid would play cowboys with.

"But that's only a .22. A popgun," David said in disbelief. "Don't you have a rifle or a shotgun?"

"I'm a little short-handed to operate long guns, Doc, in case you hadn't noticed. The .22 will do the job up close. You'd better make a run for it while you can. Just book back into the swamp. They're city boys, they probably won't be able to track you."

"I'm afraid it's a little late for that," David said grimly as a dark green Range Rover eased to a halt at the edge of the clearing. Two men climbed out. If they'd ever been college boys, it was a long time back. Both were heavily built, wearing gangbanger duds, hunter green Carhartt work clothes that had never seen an honest day's labor.

At that distance David couldn't make out faces. One of them was wearing a black baseball cap turned backward, the other one had a blue kerchief tied over his hair, pirate style. And both of them were packing military surplus assault rifles with folding metal stocks and curved banana clips.

"College kids?" David said quietly. "From where? Beirut?"

"You know, I'm beginnin' to think maybe Norm may not have been entirely straight with me about a few details," Lamotte said. "You shouldn't have gotten mixed up in this, Doc."

"You're telling me," David said, ducking farther back into the shadows.

"Yo! Jack Lamotte! We got business with you. Come on out, old man!" Both gunmen were white, but the accent was strictly inner-city Detroit.

"What do you want?" Lamotte called back.

"You got somethin' belongs to us, Pops. You got five seconds to give it up or we're gonna blow that shack of yours down around your ears."

"You try that, you'll never find your stuff. It's all here. Why don't you come take a look?" Jack said, stepping into the open doorway. "You got younger legs. Don't be afraid. I won't hurt you none."

The two gunmen exchanged a glance. "Whose Jeep is that?"

"Belongs to a friend. Stopped by to do a little huntin'. He's off in the woods somewhere."

"He'd better stay gone," the gunman with the bandanna grunted. "If he shows up, we got enough ammo to go around." He

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said something inaudible to his buddy, who took up a firing position behind the Range Rover, resting the barrel of his rifle on its hood to cover the cabin and the Jeep. "You stay put, old man," Bandanna called, moving warily forward, one measured step at a time. "And if I see anybody else, you're gone." He kept his weapon waist-high, its muzzle trained on Lamotte's chest.

"What can we do?" David hissed.

"We've gotta get 'em both in here," Lamotte said quietly. "We've got no chance, otherwise."

"We've got no chance anyway," David shot back. "You make one false move and he'll cut you in half with that thing."

"Get in the bedroom," Lamotte said. "When you hear him yell, come runnin'. It's our only shot."

"That's crazy!" David whispered. "Just tell them the truth, that the stuff is gone!"

"Dammit, get out of sight," Lamotte said. "If he spots you now he'll kill us both."

David started to argue, but it was too late. Lamotte turned away, ignoring him, and the gunman was getting too close for David to risk another word. He carefully sidled behind the trade blanket that shielded the bedroom.

The room held a cot, a single clothes pole, and more bookshelves. There was nowhere to hide and nothing that even looked like a weapon. Sweet Jesus. Shrinking into the shadows beside the doorway, David peered out of the narrow space between the blanket and the door frame.

"All right, Pops, I'm here," Bandanna said, halting in front of the door, looking cautiously about him. "You'd best give me what we come for or I might just blow off your other leg and whittle you down to the size of home plate."

Up close, he was clearly no college kid. Bandanna was thirtyish, hatchet-faced, with hard gray eyes and a thin scar that trickled down from the left corner of his mouth.

"That's not good enough," Jack countered. "Norm promised me a cut. Since I'm the one holdin' the crank, I figure half of his share would be about right."

"Is the stuff here?" the gunman asked suspiciously.

"It's inside, but you'll never get it if anything happens to me."

"Hey, I got no beef with you, Pops. You're safe as a jailhouse as long as you give us what we want. Half of Norm's share sounds fair to me. Show me the stuff."

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"It's in here," Jack said, limping away from the door, using his cane.

Without warning, the gunman lunged through the doorway and flattened himself against the wall, covering the room with his weapon. He fired off a dozen rounds, slugs slamming into the walls, scattering books, smashing the few bits of furniture. The gunman licked his lips, his eyes flicking around the room like a bat in a bonfire. "You see what this thing can do, old man? I can turn this dump into kindling in a heartbeat and you along with it. Maybe I ought to chop you up a little just to show you we're serious."

"Hell, I know you're serious," Jack said quietly. "I found Norman last night after you got done with him. What are you so nervous about?" Jack flapped his empty sleeve. "Afraid I might strongarm you?"

"Yeah, I'm shakin' in my boots," Bandanna said. "You said the stuff's here? Where? I don't see it."

"It's in the stove there, along with some kindling. If the law shows, it goes up in smoke before they can cross the yard."

"So tell me, old man, what's supposed to keep me from poppin' you right now and just takin' it?"

"For openers, you don't know whether I'm tellin' you the truth," Jack said evenly. "Maybe the stuff's not in there. Or maybe not all of it is. Maybe I'm holding some of it back until I see my share of the money."

"Yeah? You know, the last guy that held out on me didn't last very long. Just long enough to tell me about you. Maybe we oughta hang you up to one of these rafters, see how long you last."

"Okay, okay, cool it," Jack said, gulping. "I'm not jerkin' you around. The stuff's there. All of it."

"It damn sure better be," Bandanna snapped. "Now get over against the wall and keep your hands—'scuse me, keep your *hand* where I can see it. And I'm tellin' you right now, if you're lyin' to me—"

"I'm not," Jack said, completely cowed now, almost cowering. "It's all there."

"We'll see about that," Bandanna said, kneeling by the stove. He shifted the gun to his left hand, keeping the muzzle aimed in Jack's direction. He pulled the heavy cast-iron door completely open and groped inside. There was a muffled *snick* and Bandanna froze, his eyes widening. "My arm!" Bandanna roared.

Jack lunged before the gunman could react, slashing him across

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the wrist with his cane, knocking the assault rifle out of his grip. Bandanna tried to pull his hand out of the stove, but something was holding it from within.

Jack slammed the metal door closed on Bandanna's arm with his cane. "Doc," he said quietly, "you'd better get out here."

"Kenny!" Bandanna shouted. "Get in here! Waste 'em! Kill 'em all!"

David charged out of the bedroom, wild-eyed. "Hold him down and keep him away from that gun," Jack said, hustling back to the front door. Bandanna was writhing on the floor with one arm inside the stove, clawing for the assault rifle with his free hand. David tackled him, jerking his arm away from the weapon. Bandanna slammed him across the face with his elbow, bloodying his mouth, thrusting him away.

"Jack!" David gasped, grappling desperately with Bandanna to keep him from reaching the gun. But Lamotte was ignoring the struggle on the floor. He'd limped to the corner of the room, crouching in shadows away from the front door. And suddenly the doorway darkened as the second gunman burst through it.

David only glimpsed his face a moment, flushed with rage, teeth bared in a feral snarl as he raised his rifle . . . when Jack Lamotte calmly shot him in the head with his .22.

The pop of the small pistol was scarcely louder than a champagne cork. Kenny stumbled, apparently more surprised than hurt. He started to turn towards Jack, then crumpled slowly, like an inflatable figure with a puncture wound. Once down, he didn't move again.

In the momentary stillness, Bandanna drove his fist into David's midsection, doubling him over. Gagging, David managed to topple onto the assault weapon, trapping it beneath him as Bandanna kicked at him, trying to knock him away from the gun.

"That's enough of that," Jack said quietly, limping over to cover the trapped thug, keeping well clear of his swinging boots.

"You're dead!" Bandanna raged, rolling over to face him. "Both of you! The cops can't hang anything on me for this, and even if they do, I'll get out. I'll tear you apart, or my people will!"

"Maybe they'll try," Jack said, nodding. "But you won't, mister. Not after the way you did Norm." He raised the revolver, centering the muzzle between Bandanna's eyes.

The thug froze. "You're bluffin', old cripple," he began—

But Lamotte wasn't. David was still doubled over gasping for

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breath when he heard the report of the pistol. Bandanna shuddered at the impact, then went completely still. David rolled clear of him and struggled to his knees.

He stared at Bandanna's lifeless form for a dazed moment, then turned on Lamotte. "You killed him," he said in disbelief. "Jesus, he was helpless and you just—"

"Didn't sound helpless to me," Lamotte said, slipping the revolver into his belt. "You think this was like a boxing match, Doc? Queensbury Rules? You knock a guy down, then let him back up? It ain't. He would've killed us both, and anybody else who had the bad luck to be in his way."

"He nearly did kill us," David said, pushing the assault rifle away. "Why couldn't he pull his hand out of the stove?"

"Wolf trap," Jack said. "I imagine it smarted some, but it was a helluva lot better deal than he gave Norm. Or you. Looks like he popped you a pretty good shot in the jaw. You okay?"

"I think so," David said, touching his bleeding mouth with his fingertips. "I feel like I've been sledgehammered."

Lamotte rummaged in the wooden cupboard beside the sink, came up with an unbroken pint of Jack Daniel's Black Label, and handed it to David. "Take a taste. You look like you need it."

David took a short pull from the bottle, wincing against the bite of the whiskey. "Whoa," he said, blinking and shaking his head. "Maybe that wasn't such a good idea." He set the bottle on the counter, wincing as he did so. Keeping his breathing shallow, he gingerly traced his ribs with his fingertips. "I can't feel anything broken, but it's definitely contused."

"You sure?" Jack asked drily. "I thought you were a veterinarian."

"I try to be, when I'm not too busy being a punching bag for psycho dope dealers."

"You're gonna have a fat lip, maybe, but we came out way ahead of the game, Doc. Coyotes like these run in packs. We were damned lucky there were only the two of them or we'd be dead now. Hell, we still could be."

"How do you mean?"

"The late Mr. Bandanna there was right about one thing, Doc. When his friends find out what happened here, they'll come for us. Or for me, anyway. With a little luck you can still get clear of this."

"I don't understand," David said.

"I'm offerin' you an out," Lamotte said. "No matter how you look at it, I'm through here. I'll have to run like a scalded dog."

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"What are you talking about? Why should you run?"

"For openers, I've got two dead men here, both shot in the head at close range, and one of 'em was unarmed. The law's liable to take a dim view of that. Might even call it murder."

"That's crazy. No jury would—"

"—would convict you, Doc, but me? I'm not so sure. I'm a cedar savage. I live out here on my own away from folks. Maybe they'd figure I was mixed up in this from the first. Maybe they'd put me away awhile just to be on the safe side. The bottom line is, I'm not willin' to lay my freedom on the line for other people to decide about. There's somethin' about havin' an empty sleeve and pant leg that don't inspire much trust in the system. I'd rather try my luck on the road north to Canada."

"But I'll back your story, you know that."

"Don't be stupid," Lamotte said, exasperated. "The only chance you have to get clear of this is to tell the law that you found things the way they are, that it was all over when you showed up. If you admit you were involved, the rest of their gang will be after you like a pack of wolves, and you're an easy man to find. It's better this way for both of us. Give me a two-hour start, then tell the law whatever you have to."

"I don't know," David said. "It's all happening too fast."

"Look, Doc, if you feel like you're honor bound to tell the truth, go for it, but you've gotta give me a runnin' start. I don't want to tie you up, but I will if I have to. Will you give me your word you won't set the law on me for a couple hours?"

"No," David said slowly. "I don't think I can do that."

Their eyes locked for what seemed like a very long time, and David was suddenly aware that Jack Lamotte still had the gun. And that he'd just killed two thugs without blinking an eye.

Lamotte looked away first, shaking his head slowly. "What the hell, I guess I'll just have to take the chance you've got better sense than you've shown so far. We'll leave things like they are, but you'd better think on what I said. It's a bad road out to the highway from here. I'd take it slow if I were you."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"Thanks for tryin' to help us out," Lamotte said, using his cane to walk stiffly to the door. "Tell Curt I'm sorry I got him into this mess. I never meant for it to come down this way."

"I'll tell him."

"I'd appreciate it. Take care of yourself, Doc." Lamotte turned

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and hobbled out. A moment later David heard his pickup truck roar to life and rumble out of the yard.

As the truck's sound faded, David glanced around the room, taking stock. A shambles. Books were scattered everywhere, ripped from their shelves by gunfire. It was a miracle he was alive. With a little help from a cedar savage.

Still, he couldn't just let Lamotte run away like this. He'd killed two men and fleeing was against the law. Abetting it might make him an accessory. He kept a cellular phone packed in the boot of his Jeep for emergencies. He could give Wolinski a call and the sheriff could have Lamotte in custody before he got out of the county.

Lamotte. He called himself a cedar savage and most of the town would probably agree. Living out here alone, half crazy. Half a man, really. One arm, one leg, one eye. But he hadn't always been like that.

For a moment David tried to picture him whole, as he must have been in that sunny summer of '67, when all of these books had been plans for a life, instead of a substitute for it.

Maybe executing these two thugs wasn't legal, or even right.

But Jack had done a wrong thing once before. He'd gone to a foreign land to make war on people he'd never met because his country asked him to. And he'd paid a terrible price for it.

Did that justify what he'd done here? Of course not. Still . . .

A breeze from the open door riffled a book near David's foot. He bent stiffly and picked it up. *Meditations,* by Marcus Aurelius. Hadn't read it since college. Always meant to, never seemed to have the time. And yet how much time could it take? An hour? Two at the most.

He carried the pint of bourbon and the book outside, and eased down with his back against the cabin wall in a patch of waning sunlight.

"From my grandfather Verus I learned good morals and the government of my temper." A sharp guy, old Marcus. The world would be a better place if a few more folks would follow his example. David twisted off the cap of the whiskey bottle and tossed it aside. He took a deep pull, coughing as the smoky liquid seared a fiery path down the back of his throat.

God, it was good. So was being alive. He tilted the book to catch more of the sunlight.

"From the reputation and memory of my father, I learned modesty and . . ." ●

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DARK LADY DOWN

by Loren D. Estleman

"Valentino?" said the woman.

"Valentino," said Valentino.

"Seriously?"

"Unfortunately."

She chuckled. The famous husky voice had been further roughened by fifty years of cigarettes. "I was told you died the year I was born."

"That would be a mistake. I'm a big fan."

"You needn't flatter me, Mr. Valentino. I've already decided to receive you tomorrow afternoon. Would one o'clock be convenient?"

He said it would be if it was for her, and they broke the connection.

"This story features a character on whom I hope to peg a series," Loren Estleman told *EQMM*. "Valentino is a 'film detective'; an archivist who travels the world searching for bits and pieces of classic motion pictures that would be lost to history but for his efforts. Along the way, he pieces together the odd murder mystery as well . . ."

The next day, Valentino put on his best summer-weight suit with a pale blue shirt. He hesitated over whether to wear a necktie, then selected one of the handful he kept for excursions east. He always felt conspicuous wearing one in southern California, but the Old Hollywood had different standards. He wanted to make a good impression.

The house was one of the stately sprawling old Spanish villas pegged to the side of Laurel Canyon. Climbing the long flight of flagstone steps to the front door, Valentino felt a niggling sense of déjà vu. He wondered where he had seen the place before.

Then he remembered: It was the house where Ivy Lane had shot Cornel Wilde in *Switchback*. These were the very steps where Wilde had stumbled and then rolled down, finally landing on his back in the street. His costar had either lent her own home to the production or had become enamored with it during filming and

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bought it later. It looked less forbidding in color than it had in black and white. She had removed the sinister hedges and planted flowers in boxes under the windows.

Immediately after he rang the bell, the door was opened by a man whose broad bulk filled the opening as thoroughly as a second door. He wore a tan poplin sportcoat over a white knitted shirt, open at the neck to show his smooth tanned throat.

"Are you with the police or the coroner's office?"

The voice was a deep drumroll. Stepping back, the visitor stared up into a pair of nostrils like ship's funnels and said, "Neither. I have an appointment with Miss Lane. The name is Valentino."

The man-mountain rumbled. The noise seemed to indicate amusement. "Yeah. You sure look like him."

Sadly, that was true. His light olive coloring, clean profile, and the glossy black hair that he could only control by brushing it straight back from his forehead were a coincidence that vexed him constantly. As far as he knew, there was no blood relationship between his family and the silent-film star, but all the same he had had to put up with lame jokes all his life. In college he had been known as the Sheik, a nickname he would likely still be struggling under if the new generation's knowledge of the cinema of the past didn't stop at *Star Wars*.

"Please tell Miss Lane I'm here," he said.

"All her appointments are canceled, sorry." The door started to close.

A female voice called from the other side of the poplin sportcoat. "Who is it, Vivien?"

Vivien?

"Someone who says his name is Valentino, and it fits. Come to see Miss Lane. I told him—"

"Yes, I heard that part. Show him in."

The giant hesitated, then moved to one side. Valentino stepped over the threshold and surrendered his hand to a solid grip belonging to a woman nearly as tall as he. She wore large red-framed glasses and a tailored red suit without a blouse that did wondrous things for a figure that didn't seem to need to have much done for it. Her honey-colored hair was caught loosely behind her neck.

"I'm Georgia Tanner, Ivy Lane's attorney. She mentioned your conversation."

"Then I won't have to explain myself," he said.

"Something about one of Ivy's films."

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"Shades of Night. It was about a plot by American Nazis to assassinate the president. RKO withdrew it from theaters when Roosevelt died and shelved it. I fully believe Miss Lane's print is the only complete one in existence. If it's for sale I'd like to make an offer."

"Ah. You're a collector." She might have said, *You clean toilets.*

"Not personally, although I suffer from most of the symptoms. I'm a film historian, under contract to UCLA. My job is to locate and acquire rare motion pictures so they can be preserved for future generations to see and appreciate."

"It sounds a little like detective work."

"Sometimes it's exactly like it. Some films seem just as determined to stay lost as any fugitive from justice."

"A dick," rumbled big Vivien. "I said it the second I saw him."

Valentino looked at him, and felt a shock of recognition. Now that there was distance between them, he could take in the huge man's mane of thick black hair, graying now, square chin, and eyebrows that collided over his nose. The name hadn't been Vivien. In the early sixties, he was billed on drive-in screens across the country as "Bull" Broderick, one of the later, dumber Tarzans. The foyers and pantries of Greater Los Angeles were littered with more half-forgotten faces than a cutting room floor.

The film detective glanced at his watch. He had a man to see in Thousand Oaks about sixty feet of an undiscovered Chaplin two-reeler at four o'clock. "Could I see Miss Lane now?"

The professional smile left the attorney's face. Watching her, Valentino wasn't sure it had ever been there.

"Miss Lane is dead. She committed suicide late last night or early this morning."

The news came as a physical blow. Valentino had never lived in a world that didn't contain Ivy Lane. She had sounded so lively over the telephone, so much more like herself than the dozens of female impressionists who had done her onstage in years past. "Have the police definitely established suicide?"

"We're waiting for them now," Georgia Tanner said. "She always came down promptly at eleven for brunch. When she was more than a half-hour late, Vivien went up to look in on her. He tried to wake her, but her skin was already cool. He called me. I found an empty prescription bottle on her bedside table. It was Seconal."

"Vivien is the butler?"

"Bodyguard," said the giant.

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Valentino looked from him to the attorney. "Why would a seventy-year-old woman need a bodyguard?"

"She didn't. She hadn't since she quit being Hollywood's Bitch Goddess when CinemaScope came in. But she was accustomed to having one around. She played so many villainesses, you see, and some moviegoers had trouble separating screen reality from the genuine article. That was over long before Vivien came. In his two years here he was more of a companion. He was absolutely devoted to her."

He looked again at the big man, and saw that his eyes were pink and swollen. Valentino felt a little more kindly toward him then. They were both fans of Ivy Lane.

"May I see her?"

Ms. Tanner was startled. "Why?"

"I've waited all my life. Of course, I'll understand if you refuse."

She consulted the floor. It was blue and white Mexican tile, the same shining squares William Demarest had dropped his cigar ashes on when he came to investigate Cornel Wilde's murder.

"I don't suppose it would do any harm," she said.

"I go too." Vivien sounded like the ape man of old.

The three walked through large, sun-splashed rooms and up an open swirl of staircase with a brass banister like the railing of an ocean liner. Original paintings for posters advertising Ivy Lane's movies lined the staircase wall: Ivy locked in steamy embraces with Wilde, Dick Powell, John Payne, Robert Mitchum, Alan Ladd. Invariably, a sinister figure lurked in the keylit background, gripping a gun: Peter Lorre, Elijah Cook, Jr., Steve Brodie—a pictorial *Who's Who* of shady supporting players from Central Casting's endless supply of bottom-feeders. The original Dark Lady of the uncertain postwar period, Lane was the stereotypical seductress who lured the ambivalent hero to the wrong side of the law, and eventually his doom. Her gleaming black tresses and predatory purr had furnished an insidious antidote to the blond, perky heroines who had dominated the cinema before Pearl Harbor.

The bedroom, done entirely in cream and black and as big as a warehouse, was scarcely large enough to contain the enormity of death. Fresh flowers bloomed unaware in a vase on a low dresser cluttered with unposed family pictures in silver frames; a pair of fuzzy pink slippers on the floor beside the bed and a pale pink silk dressing gown draped over the footboard awaited their mistress. Here the only item pertaining to her movies was the honorary Oscar presented to her two years before by a grateful Academy,

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looking lonely on a corner of the vanity table. A framed certificate commemorating her efforts on behalf of the World Hunger Foundation occupied a much more prominent position on the wall just inside the door.

As the trio entered, a man and woman seated next to the sleigh bed looked up at them with bleak eyes. The man was gray-haired, dressed expensively but rather obviously in stacked lapels and a yellow silk handkerchief, and might have been considered large in any company that didn't include the hulking Vivien. The woman was a few years younger and wore plain slacks and a sweater and no makeup. Her hair was cut short.

"Dale Grant, Miss Lane's nephew," said Ms. Tanner. "His wife, Louise. This is Mr. Valentino."

"Valentino will do," said Valentino.

Grant rose and offered a listless hand. "Are you a policeman?"

Valentino shook his head. That made twice in his thirty-three years he'd been mistaken for the law, both times on the same day. "Just a fan. With your permission, I'd like to pay my respects."

"Don't tell me it's on the news already. I wouldn't have thought she was such good copy. It's been so long since she retired."

Miss Tanner said, "Valentino is here by invitation. He made an appointment yesterday."

"That's odd." Grant's brow puckered. "Aunt Ivy was scrupulous about keeping commitments. Even despondent as she must have been—"

The attorney interrupted. "These decisions are often made on the spur of the moment, Dale. She put up a cheerful front, but I don't suppose she ever forgave Hollywood for tossing her on the scrap heap at the age of thirty. There's talk of remaking *Carlotta,* with Madonna, of all people. That was Ivy's signature film. It must have eaten at her, though she wouldn't show it. She seemed in good spirits when I left her last night; but then, she was an actress."

"Perhaps you're right. Be my guest, Valentino. She'll be on exhibit from now until she's buried anyway. Too bad she can't enjoy it. She pretended otherwise, but she enjoyed being the center of attention. If you'll excuse me." He went out. His wife remained in her chair for an undecided moment, then got up and followed him.

"He loved his aunt very much," Georgia Tanner said. "It was a shock for him to come here for brunch and hear the news."

"Is he a bitter man usually?"

"Only with himself. I understand there was a row when he

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dropped out of medical school and went into business. Things were never the same between aunt and nephew after that. Not that they ever spoke of it when I was around."

Valentino approached the small still figure on the bed. Age had scored and lengthened the face that had seduced half the second string of leading men, and yet the features were girlish in repose. Her hair, tinted yellow now to conceal the gray, was arranged in a demure braid over her left shoulder. She wore a plain flannel nightgown and her slim perfect hands were nearly as pale as the cream-colored spread upon which they rested.

"Did she leave a note?"

The attorney shook her head, watching the inert face. "She wasn't much for writing, notes or letters."

"Was she as vain as Grant said?"

"Not among friends and family, but she liked to put on a show for strangers. She said people who came to see Ivy Lane expected an event, and she wasn't about to disappoint them."

As she spoke, Valentino wandered the room, unobtrusively peeping inside drawers and closets. The inlaid ebony dresser was full of extravagant evening gowns, the racks a riot of rainbow silk and satin negligees. Some still had price tags.

Vivien's steam-shovel paw descended upon Valentino's shoulder.

"Get your jollies looking at dead women's undies?" The bodyguard's voice was a low growl.

Valentino ignored him—so far as one could ignore a garage door with an attitude. "Was Grant her only living relative?" he asked Ms. Tanner.

"Yes. There was a son by her first marriage, but he was killed in Vietnam. Why?"

"Close family members are generally well provided for in wills."

She smiled then. "I think you're starting to take the detecting part of your work too seriously. As much as an adoring fan might prefer to think otherwise, there's nothing to indicate Ivy didn't take her own life."

"Attorneys who execute wills frequently come in for a handsome commission," he said.

Vivien squeezed Valentino's shoulder. The bones shifted. "You paid your respects, Monsieur Beaucaire. Hit the road."

Valentino gritted his teeth against the pain. "What's a bodyguard's devotion worth in probate?"

The reply was a Tarzan yell and constricted ligaments. The film detective felt his blood draining into his feet.

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"We'll humor him, Vivien. He's starstruck."

The hand lifted.

Ms. Tanner crossed her arms. "Ivy's third husband went through what was left of her fortune thirty years ago. Aside from this house and property, her Social Security pension was all she had, and most of that went into taxes and upkeep. I charged her a minimal fee to manage her affairs."

"Was Grant here last night?" he asked Vivien.

The bodyguard scowled. "No. This is the first time he and Mrs. Grant have been in all week."

"Does he have a key?"

"Sure. He's her nephew. But nobody comes in or goes out without me knowing."

"Where do you sleep?"

"Other end of the hall."

"Let's go talk to Grant."

"Did I hear my name?"

The three turned as Dale Grant opened the door from the hall. His wife fluttered in behind him.

Valentino said, "One question, Grant. How'd you do it?"

"Do what?" The nephew's big heatlamp-tanned face was flat.

Georgia Tanner unfolded her arms. "Now I'm beginning to side with Vivien. Weren't you listening, Valentino, when I said Miss Lane's estate wasn't worth committing murder to acquire?"

"Wasn't it? A big house on four acres in one of the most exclusive neighborhoods in town? How much was the last offer she refused?"

The attorney's eyes dilated behind her glasses. "A million five. She told the agent she'd see him in hell before she'd let some Arab potentate house his harem in the garden."

"Was Grant present when the offer was made?"

Grant's face darkened. He took a step toward Valentino. The bodyguard held up an index finger as big as a sash weight and he stopped.

"I'll guess your method," the film detective said. "I've made a career out of assembling things from scrap. Last night, after Ms. Tanner left and you were sure your aunt and her watchdog were asleep, you let yourself in, dissolved a lethal dose of Seconal into a solution, and injected it into her bloodstream. You'd know how much to use from your medical school training, and anyone can get hold of a hypodermic. Vivien wouldn't have heard anything from his room because there was no struggle. Being family, you knew

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where she kept the pills. It wouldn't have taken any time at all to empty the bottle into a sink, wipe off your fingerprints, and place it on her bedside table to make it look like suicide. A million dollars for ten minutes' work is good wages even by Hollywood standards."

Grant turned to Vivien. "This is my house now. Throw this man out."

The big man stayed put. "I don't come with the house."

"Please go on," said Georgia Tanner.

Valentino said, "Grant forgot one thing: Miss Lane's nightgown. You said she liked to put on a show for strangers, and he said himself his aunt liked being the center of attention. She had closets full of beautiful negligees. She would never have taken her own life in plain flannel."

A howl, as of a mortally wounded grizzly, shattered the tension in the room. Vivien reached down, gathered Dale Grant's stacked lapels in his enormous hands, and lifted him off the floor. The nephew gulped air.

"Put him down!"

Three heads swiveled toward Louise Grant. Dale's wife had her purse open in one hand and a hypodermic syringe in the other. She held the needle in an underhand grip like a switchblade. The point glittered. "Put him down or I'll stick this in one of your kidneys," she told Vivien. Her thin, drawn face was feral.

After a moment the bodyguard lowered her husband to the floor and let go. Grant clawed the yellow handkerchief out of his pocket and mopped his face.

"She wouldn't die."

The others said nothing, watching the woman. Her knuckles were white on the barrel of the syringe.

"She was going to outlive us all," she said. "Dale's business was failing. She could have sold the house and bailed him out and had plenty left over, but she wouldn't. I pleaded with her. She said he should have considered the consequences when he dropped out of medical school."

"Louise." Grant twisted his handkerchief between his fists.

"I knew you'd never do it. She made you dance to her tune the same way she manipulated the men in her movies. I was a registered nurse when I married you. Remember how refreshed you felt this morning? You never suspected I put Seconal in your tea last night. I was gone for over an hour with your keys and you slept right through it."

"What are you going to do, Mrs. Grant?" Valentino asked.

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"There's no place to run."

For a second she appeared lost. Then her eyes grew as cold as the corpse on the bed.

"Yes, there is," she said. "The same place I sent the old hag." And before anyone could move, she stabbed the needle into her left arm and rammed home the plunger.

"That should do it." The lieutenant from L.A. Homicide, blond and freckled in a Michael Jackson suit—narrow lapels and a ribbon tie—flipped shut his notebook. He was no William Demarest. "Your name's Valentino?"

Valentino nodded and braced himself.

"That's Spanish, isn't it?"

He relaxed. "Italian. Several generations back."

"No kidding. I've got an uncle who's Neapolitan. He married into the family."

He wondered if the lieutenant even knew that films had once been silent.

"Will Mrs. Grant live?" Georgia Tanner asked.

"Maybe. The EMS boys said there's a good chance there was just some residue in the needle. If she does it's off to lockup."

He reminded them to come downtown later and make a statement for the record, then left. Valentino and the attorney were standing in the tiled foyer. Dale Grant had accompanied his wife in the ambulance and Vivien was outside making sure the morgue attendants didn't drop the stretcher containing the mortal remains of Ivy Lane. Ms. Tanner said, "You really are a detective. Did you suspect Louise when you accused Dale?"

"If I said I did, would you believe me?"

"I'd give you the benefit of the doubt."

"Anyway, I didn't think Miss Lane would kill herself because they were doing a crummy remake of one of her best pictures. I saw her bedroom. She placed more importance on old family snapshots and her charity work than she did on her acting career. She may have been a little vain, but she was no Norma Desmond."

"Poor Ivy. How she'd have reveled in all this fuss." She opened the front door for him. "She wasn't rich, but she always made good on her debts. How can she repay you for solving her murder?"

Six months later, when California Probate Court was satisfied with the division of the Ivy Lane Estate, a messenger came to Valentino's office carrying a package containing all four reels of *Shades of Night.* ●

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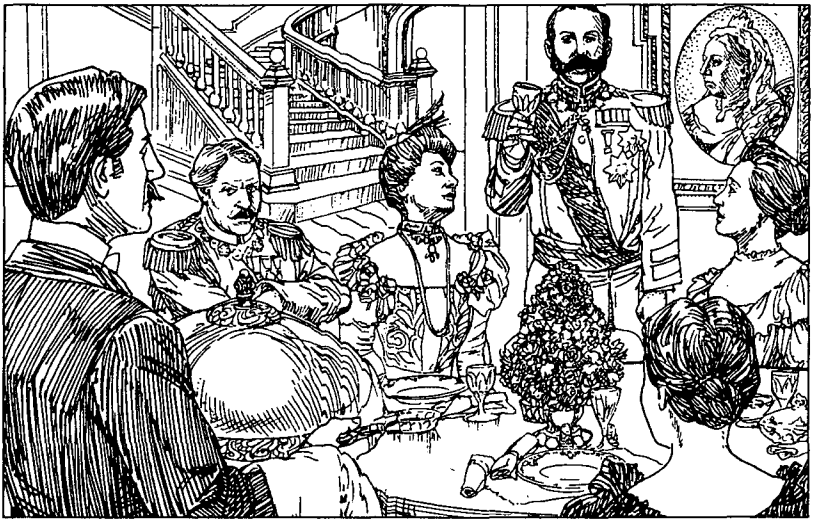

Art by Allen Davis

MURDER AT THE JUBILEE

by Amy Myers

"Can there be such a thing as a perfect murder, Didier?" Leopold, Grand Duke of Transmenia, guest of honour, had a jesting note in his voice which did not escape the *maître chef.*

Auguste's worst suspicions were confirmed as this *vieux marron* of a cliché was idly thrown at him: He had been invited to prepare this prestigious dinner on the evening of Her Majesty Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee not because of his delicate touch with a *chartreuse à la Belle-Vue,* but because of his unsought experiences in the field of detection.

"By its very definition, sir, a perfect murder would not lend itself to discovery." Auguste smoothly returned the clichéd answer, despite the irritation inside him, which was boiling up like a neglected stockpot.

"What does this cook know of crime?" shouted the Grand Duke Wilhelm of Meinenberg.

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"He specializes in murder, Wilhelm," his archenemy Leopold informed him blandly.

"This is a Transmenian joke?"

"In Transmenia we specialise in the truth," Leopold said.

"In Meinenberg we specialise in food tasters. I will eat nothing save what you eat, Leopold."

The Grand Duke of Transmenia chuckled, but Auguste smouldered with rage. A joke—if joke it was—about *his* food was insupportable.

"Fear not, Wilhelm. Monsieur Didier solves murders, he does not commit them. He is here to present the perfect dinner, not the perfect murder."

Amy Myers was born in Kent, England, and worked for many years as an editor and director of a London publishing firm before marrying an American, James Myers. The couple's first home was in Paris, and it was there, surrounded by good food, that the author came up with the idea for a series of mystery novels featuring a master chef. The following is one of the character's rare appearances in a short story.

Recalled to duty, Auguste cast an anxious eye over the array of culinary masterpieces in their chafing dishes: the soups, the fish, the *entrées, rélèves, rotis,* the vast choice of *entremets, les desserts,* savouries—yes, all even to his perfectionist eye appeared ready.

At the circular dining table the gleaming cut glass and the three-foot-high centrepiece (a tightly packed pinnacle of flowerheads—a copy of that adorning the Buckingham Palace dining table this very evening—which was topped by a crown of tiny rosebuds with "VRI" picked out in contrasting colours) would not disgrace his food. But would the diners, regardless of their high ranks? Did they have that devotion to the finer points of gastronomy essential to appreciate fully an Auguste Didier banquet? The party of eight had just seated themselves after descending the stairs from the drawing room of the Eaton Square London house of Lord and Lady Simple. Bartholomew, Lord Simple, the host, was more at home shooting game than recognising its finer qualities on the plate, and the hostess, his wife Amelia, promised little more. Auguste had met many Lady Simples in society; their brains seemed to work only on a fixed radius from the dictates of their

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mirrors. On her left, as guest of honour, was the elegant, tall Grand Duke Leopold, and on her right his arch rival the Grand Duke Wilhelm of Meinenberg, who was anything but elegant and tall. On Lord Simple's left was the Grand Duchess Gerda, whose ample girth, clad in regal purple, complemented her husband Wilhelm's. Next to her sat the upright Colonel Richards, a *poisson froid,* Auguste thought, despite his scarlet dress uniform and colourful purple sash of the Grand Order of Transmenia: He had a reputation of great integrity. Between him and Wilhelm was the colonel's sister Penelope, an unobtrusive wren to match the bright plumage of Gerda. She was unmarried, and had the gentle thoroughbred looks of the aristocratic Englishwoman. On the far side of the table from the colonel, between Leopold and the host, sat his wife, Jane Richards, a rose of full mature beauty, whose tasteful black gown with a minimum of ornamentation made Amelia's bright blue satin covered with fussy flowers immediately childish.

All old friends, so Lord Simple had told him. Why then, Auguste wondered, did he have doubts as to the success of the evening ahead? He watched on tenterhooks as the first spoonfuls of *Parmentier* soup with sorrel were lifted to chattering lips. None of the partakers showed signs of the earth having moved as a result of this gastronomic experience, although none could doubt it was fit for a queen's jubilee.

Diamonds! That was the reason for his misgivings. Why had Lord Simple, not an overimaginative man, instructed him to ensure that no one mentioned diamonds this evening? Auguste had almost forgotten in the excitement of preparing a new recipe for the ortolans. He had rushed to ask his friend Emma Pryde, who had shared in the cooking this evening and who was even now down in the Eaton Square kitchen in case of disaster to the slightest detail. She had laughed coarsely when he asked nervously if he were not right in recalling that the Grand Duchess Gerda owned a diamond mine in Kimberley, one of the few independent ones left, and moreover that she had an obsession that one day her mine was going to produce the biggest diamond in the world, and that no one else should own large diamonds in the meantime.

"You are, old cock," Emma informed him amiably.

"And did I not hear a rumour that the Grand Duke Leopold is the new owner of the Cavillac diamond?"

"You did, old cock."

"Then is it not possible the word diamond might be mentioned?"

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"It is, old cock. But there'll be murder, if so."

He had pondered this, then dismissed it as Emma's usual exaggeration. Now it came back with dismal force, like ill-cooked garlic.

Amelia turned to her guest of honour and, blithely ignoring Auguste and five footmen, enquired, "I hear confidentially, Leopold, you are to attend the state reception at Buckingham Palace on Thursday evening."

Leopold nodded. "I have that honour, Amelia. James"—he glanced at Colonel Richards—"as a personal friend of the Prince of Wales, you too will be present, I am sure."

"His Royal Highness has done me the honour of asking me to attend, Leopold. My wife also."

The Grand Duke's gaze lingered on the lovely face of Jane Richards for a moment. "In that case, I shall look forward even more keenly to the occasion."

"Is it true," Amelia broke in with more eagerness than tact, "that you are to marry Princess Victoria?"

"Many have dared to hope and been disappointed, Amelia," the Grand Duke replied diplomatically. "She is the daughter of the heir to the throne."

"They say she's changed her mind about never marrying," Amelia swept on, "and even regretted turning down—oh, dear, what is his name, he's prime minister—"

"Lord Rosebery, my love, but he resigned, if you recall," Barty supplied fondly.

Penelope leapt nobly into the breach. "I'm sure we all wish Leopold well, on whomever his choice may fall." She smiled calmly at the Grand Duke.

"My dear Penelope, what a charming sentiment from an old friend."

A snort from Wilhelm. "Obviously love begins with a P for Position in Transmenia. In Meinenberg we believe in democracy." Gerda had been plain Miss Van Bartog when he married her (and her father's diamond mine).

"In Transmenia our people can look up to their leaders."

Wilhelm's face darkened, and Auguste nearly clapped as Gerda weighed in heavily to the rescue.

"Meinenberg has an heir, Leopold. You have none."

"There is little need to remind me, Gerda, of a past that is sadly gone. I think now only of the future."

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"Why have you never married?" Amelia asked curiously.

"Because of love." The eyes of all four women were suddenly riveted on the Grand Duke. "And this evening—" his eye roved round the table—"is a sad reminder of what might have been. Ah, do not fear. I will mention no names." Nevertheless, there was an uneasy stir as the gentlemen suddenly seized his implication and the ladies cast surreptitious glances at each other.

What was coming? Auguste had feared merely the mention of diamonds; now something worse hovered—and not merely the fact that attention had now been deflected from the *timbale de sole.*

"I was, as you know, educated in Oxford," Leopold continued. "That is the period when I met you all. Those years were the happiest of times, the worst of times."

"Worst?" repeated Barty, puzzled.

"I naturally led a full social life in Oxford. Many were the beauties I met, but it was not until my last year that I found true love. Oh, how I remember the golden haze of a long, hot English summer. In my memory no rain falls, roses forever bloom, and in the distance a cricket ball strikes the willow. My beloved was at my side. I saw us ruling Transmenia together. When you are young, you see no other path than that which you so ardently desire; perfection seems within one's reach, as with Mr. Didier's exquisite timbale here. But such glimpses of paradise are meant only to taunt us."

"What happened to deprive Transmenia of this delightful lady?" Wilhelm snarled.

"My darling did not feel the same as I. I was thrust from paradise." His eyes traveled slowly round the table again, as though the pain was too great for them to rest. "Of all of us, only I remained truly alone."

A shiver of inexplicable fear collided with a frisson of curiosity somewhere in Auguste's mid spine.

"No one good enough in Transmenia for you, eh?" Wilhelm chortled.

"Better one day in paradise than a lifetime in Meinenberg." There was little zest in Leopold's perfunctory retort.

"And so you decided not to marry?" Penelope deftly cut off Wilhelm's next explosion.

"I believed I had sought love in vain. My brother, after all, had children, the succession was assured. Now I have found true happiness again, and am rewarded by double perfection: first in the

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gracious lady whom I shall ask to be my wife; and second in the Cavillac diamond which, if my suit is found acceptable, I shall surrender to Her Majesty Queen Victoria."

There was a moment of absolute stillness, broken by the harsh voice of Grand Duchess Gerda, no jolliness apparent now. "Diamond? You dare to mention the Cavillac *diamond,* Leopold?"

Why did the guest of honour have to mention that terrible word just at the climactic moment of the serving of the *ortolans au suc ananas?* Auguste fumed.

"The one with the curse on it?" Amelia asked brightly. "They say whoever steals it meets death."

Gerda crashed her hand heavily on the table. "You claim the Cavillac diamond is part of the Great Mogul stone which Tavernier was shown in the seventeenth century. It did not exist. It is merely a fairy tale."

"With a happy ending," Leopold replied smoothly. "The Great Mogul reappeared some time later in the hands of another Frenchman, Cavillac, who had it cut into nine stones of great beauty, the best of which is my Cavillac diamond. After his unfortunate death, the stone was taken to adorn a Hindu shrine. It was stolen, and there seemed to follow a trail of death until it was given to, not stolen by, my family, in whose hands it remained until it was bequeathed to me. No curse attaches to me, or to she to whom I choose to give it. Only to one who lays his hand on it in theft."

"You will barter a stolen holy relic to Her Majesty for the hand of Princess Victoria?" James asked slowly.

"Alas, I fear James does not approve my humble plan."

"Would you approve of a golden cross ripped from an altar? The stone belongs where it was found three thousand years ago—in India."

"It was found as a humble lump of mineral, not a holy relic. I surrender it in humility to India's empress."

"In Meinenberg we use one word for five empty Transmenian sentiments," Wilhelm snorted.

"That is doubtless why Meinenberg possesses no literature," Leopold replied sweetly.

"I do not believe you have this stone," Gerda informed Leopold curtly. "The Great Mogul was confused with the Kohinoor."

"My dear Gerda, the Kohinoor is a British royal heirloom now. To my knowledge there has been no recent assault on the Tower

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of London. Therefore, I shall show you the Cavillac diamond—*now!*"

"You have it here?" Gerda's face was flushed with deep emotion.

"It travels everywhere with me."

"Where?" Amelia peered eagerly at his evening dress.

"In the sash of the Grand Order of Transmenia."

With almost deliberate slowness, while waiters tried to clear away and Auguste supervised the serving of the next course, the Grand Duke produced an object and held it up in his cupped hands.

Slowly he opened them, and the black velvet covering fell away. Auguste promptly stopped all pretence of being a perfect *maître d'* and craned his neck forward to see. The diamond gleamed, sparkled, fascinated, half filling Leopold's large hand. So that was what men would kill and be killed for; now he could perhaps understand why.

"This diamond, when I present it to Her Gracious Majesty," Leopold said softly, "will bestow on me a greater happiness than I have enjoyed since I parted from my beloved twenty years ago."

"Let me see." Gerda's hand shot brusquely out, in defiance of any rules of etiquette that Meinenberg might possess.

Leopold hesitated, then shrugged slightly, as if to imply that no harm could come to a diamond with such a curse upon it. The prickles at the back of Auguste's neck strongly disagreed. He watched the diamond's sparkling progress from Leopold into the delicate hand of Jane Richards, then to Barty's trembling hand, which passed it quickly to Gerda. Her hands immediately closed over it, as if she could crush it into nonexistence. Even Wilhelm stirred uneasily at the intensity of the expression on her face.

"Shall I take it, Gerda?" James Richards asked politely from her left. She ceded it reluctantly. In a fit of derring-do, or perhaps in relief that the Cavillac was safely returned to him, having completed the circuit of the table, Leopold placed it at the top of the closely packed pyramid of flowers so that all could see its shining perfection above the rosebud crown. Auguste watched uneasily, temporarily distracted from the *entremets*. His eye flitted from the jewel to his own triumphs and back again, uncertain which to watch. Then the sight of a *pointe d'asperges* incorrectly placed decided the issue.

"Excellent, Mr. Didier," Jane Richards remarked appreciatively of the asparagus. "Your reputation is well deserved." Auguste glowed, well pleased.

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"No need to fall on your sword, Didier, like the king's chef when the fish did not arrive in time. Death with honour," Leopold laughed.

"How extraordinary for a servant," Amelia observed.

"I daresay even they hold their reputation dear," Leopold jested.

Certainly worth throttling grand dukes for, Auguste thought viciously. One day . . .

"In Meinenberg the chef would have fought a duel with the fishman," Wilhelm guffawed.

"In Transmenia we are fortunate to have a legal system."

"A legal system did not help Sir William Gordon-Cumming when he maintained his innocence of cheating at baccarat," Penelope observed quietly.

"As a gentleman he should have done the decent thing and shot himself," Barty said.

"And suppose he is innocent?" James cried.

"You seem to believe honour is the same as reputation, Barty," Jane said sharply.

"Certainly. If my wife runs off with someone else, my honour is at stake, isn't it?" Barty seemed surprised at having to explain this, even to a woman.

Auguste mused on this question of honour; surely it was a matter of the individual, not their background? This preoccupied him until the highlight of his culinary evening, his moment of glory, when the gas was turned down to its lowest point and the doors flung open to permit the entrance of his Jubilee creation in honour of Her Majesty. His magnificent *pièce montée* was wheeled in on its trolley surrounded by sixty flickering candles. There sat Her Majesty Queen Victoria in six-foot-high meringued splendour, her jewels of transparent jelly and pistachios, her throne of delicate sponge. The cry of astonishment and delight did not disappoint him.

"Your Highnesses, my lord, ladies and gentlemen—" As the gas went low, Leopold, as guest of honour, rose to his feet to indicate to his fellow guests that the moment for the royal toast had come, and they eagerly rose to gather round the white monarch.

Auguste thought of the small figure clad in black and grey silk beneath a white sunshade whom he had seen riding in her open carriage earlier that day. He had joined the cheering crowds as the carriage passed under the floral garlands and sparkling decorations spanning St. James's Street, and seen the procession representing colonies from all quarters of the earth. It was like the

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Illustrated London News suddenly sprung to life. Following the carriage had come the royal procession, then Lifeguards, Hussars, Dragoons, and more and more and more. He looked at his *pièce montée* and was satisfied. He too had played his part.

He signalled for the gaslight to be turned up again, and the party resumed their seats, awaiting their portion of Her Majesty's body. Then would follow anticlimax for Auguste, as his art ceased to be a matter of critical acclaim and turned into a mere matter of digestion.

"Wilhelm!" Gerda's voice seemed to have a tremor in it.

"Gerda?"

"The diamond, it has gone."

Five words, instant reaction. Auguste stared aghast at the empty space.

"A fine joke, eh?" Leopold said levelly. "Wilhelm, kindly return it."

"I do not have it." Wilhelm was gaping like a boiled bream.

Auguste forced his apparently paralysed limbs into action. "Could it have fallen off and rolled onto the floor?" he asked. It could, but it had not, and he promptly fell to his knees and advanced under the table, scrabbling amidst silken skirts and black-trousered legs. Upside-down faces periodically appeared under the tablecloth, and retreated shrieking words of horror.

"If this is a joke," Leopold looked grim, "replace the diamond. We will laugh, and there is an end."

No one moved.

Auguste scrambled to his feet, after a vain search, aware he must assume authority. "Close the doors, if you please," he told the senior footman, "and remain here yourself."

Amelia screamed.

"Perhaps it has fallen among the flowers," Jane suggested calmly.

"Yes." Amelia clutched thankfully at a straw.

Nine pairs of hands immediately tore the best efforts of thirty florists to pieces, scattering their art in petals and leaves over the table. But no diamond tumbled out. Auguste looked carefully round the littered table. There must be some simple explanation. True, it had been dark for some moments, but even so, the risk of being caught in theft was immense.

"Didier?" Leopold turned to him in despair.

"My friend Inspector Rose of Scotland Yard should be sent for immediately."

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Another shriek from Amelia.

"No police, Didier," Leopold decreed, "for all our sakes. The diamond must still be in this room, and scandal spreads quickly and uncontrollably. You shall be our policeman, if no one objects. You agree, Barty?"

An incoherent babble suggested he did.

"Perhaps it was a magpie?" Amelia moaned faintly.

"I feel we might have noticed if a large black and white bird had entered the window," Penelope told her hostess unfeelingly.

Auguste concentrated feverishly. Had he not succeeded in turning a spoiled hollandaise into a perfectly good sauce *à la Didier?* Nothing should be beyond his powers. He wondered what the Transmenian legal system's penalty for ignominious failure was.

"I regret we must begin by searching—"

"Us?" Penelope prompted helpfully.

"Yes, madam."

Another shriek from Amelia.

"Do not be alarmed, Amelia. I'm sure Mr. Didier will not insist on searching you personally," Penelope comforted her.

Auguste rang the bell and quickly a grim-faced Emma, dragged up in her old kitchen gown instead of her usual yellow satin, was asked to conduct the search of the ladies' persons. "And if any of you," she informed her staff amicably, "were one inch anywhere other than you should have been, I'll have your guts for garters." Consensus was quickly reached, fortunately, that the footmen had been on the far side of the room during the darkness, and Auguste secured the same acquittal for himself.

"A diamond such as the Cavillac is not easily exchangeable for money." He plunged into murky waters. "Suppression, for instance, might be a motive, or—"

Gerda grasped the implication with full force. "Why," she interrupted heavily, "would I suppress an *Indian* diamond when they are inferior to those of Kimberley?"

Wilhelm rose to his feet in some dignity. "We fight duels in Meinenberg, Didier. Unfortunately only with gentlemen."

"You must have very few duels there," Leopold commented.

"What other motives, Mr. Didier?" Penelope asked tactfully.

Auguste was only too eager to pass on. "Colonel Richards, you feel strongly about the diamond, do you not?"

"I do."

"And you oppose the marriage with Princess Victoria?"

"Her parents, Their Royal Highnesses the Prince and Princess

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of Wales, do not wish the princess to marry. As a friend, I naturally see their point of view." The reply was as stiff as an overbeaten egg white.

"Lord Simple, I see no motive for you—"

"Good of you, Didier." His tone did not bode well for Auguste's bill of account.

"—that has yet emerged," Auguste finished with red face.

A tiny squeal from Amelia was quickly stilled at Auguste's next comment.

"And the ladies. It is plain from what the Grand Duke Leopold said earlier that one of you is his former love."

"Were you *listening,* Mr. Didier?" Amelia was outraged.

"And if," ignoring this, Auguste continued, "you do not present the diamond on Thursday, sir, your suit with Princess Victoria might be jeopardised?"

"Certainly, Didier." There was some surprise in Leopold's voice. "If I fail to keep my word, for whatever reason, I am convinced my hopes would be at an end."

"Then I suggest that sometimes ladies' hearts do not follow reason. I have known them object to former loves marrying elsewhere, especially advantageously, even if they themselves are happily married at the time, or—" Auguste hesitated, "if they are still single, and belatedly wish it were otherwise."

"I am delighted to be a suspect," Penelope told him cheerfully. "I would so dislike to be excluded from joining my fellow seven—no, six, guests. I forgot Barty has as yet no motive."

Gerda snorted. "Apparently, I have two. He can have one of mine."

"Ah, a Meinenberg joke!" Leopold observed gravely.

Wilhelm stood up. "Let us all be searched, Didier, then I will challenge this oaf to a duel."

"How far do you want me to go with this search?" Emma demanded loudly. "Right into their—"

"It will be fairly obvious, I believe," Auguste broke in quickly, although he had a feeling it was not going to be as simple as that.

Jane, nearest, overheard. "I think Mr. Didier is suggesting, Mrs. Pryde, that the stone would be in our dorothy bags or even perhaps buried in our corsages." Auguste curbed an instinct to stare at Gerda's ample bosom.

"There's certainly room in mine," Amelia maintained complacently.

Her husband smiled fondly as the ladies left with Emma in

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their hostess's wake to her boudoir. Auguste bore in mind he was a *maître chef* used to absolute power over his staff. In theory, grand dukes and colonels were no different from pantry boys, he told himself feverishly.

"I would like to begin with you, sir," he began firmly, addressing Leopold.

"Myself?" Leopold asked, surprised, then laughed. "I suppose it is conceivable I stole my own diamond."

Never before had he patted a grand duke. Auguste recalled Egbert Rose's methods, which he had often observed, and adopted an insouciance he did not feel as he slipped his hand under the purple sash of the Grand Order of Transmenia (first class).

No jewel tumbled out. Almost eagerly Wilhelm offered himself for examination, and when this proved fruitless his eyes gleamed in happy anticipation. "Soon the duel," he hissed at Leopold.

Colonel Richards took his place, and his bright uniform with the ill-matching purple sash of the Transmenian Order took longer to search. At the knot of the sash, Auguste felt something hard; his first thought was that it was the belt; the second that it was not. It was hard and firmly wedged. Reluctantly, he withdrew his hand, clamped over his find.

Leopold stared at the diamond as Auguste put it into his hand. "It is cursed indeed, James."

"Leopold, I did *not* steal it," James cried feverishly, cheeks livid with confusion. "You must believe me."

"How else could it lodge itself in your sash?"

"It must have been put there."

"Only your right-hand neighbour could have put it in," Leopold replied.

Wilhelm's eyes bulged. *"My wife?* Two duels, three duels will not be enough to expunge this slur. This is some Transmenian trick." He was almost dancing up and down with rage. "Why should Gerda wish to blame the theft on James, eh? Tell me that, Transmenian trickster."

"I fear it is unlikely, sir," Auguste said miserably to Leopold, sorry to see a supposedly upright man such as James Richards exposed as the culprit. "Colonel Richards believes strongly that the diamond should be restored to India."

"I do," James replied stiltedly. "But I did not steal the diamond. I ask you to believe me." His gaze travelled round his three erstwhile friends, but saw no mercy. "Very well," he continued evenly. "This evening we discussed honour and reputation. I will leave for

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my home immediately. Pray give my apologies to my wife. Penelope will look after her." Quietly, he left the room.

Stunned, Auguste started after him, watched him leave by the front door, and returned in some bewilderment.

"He prefers it this way," Barty said awkwardly.

There was a silence, and Auguste grew white. "You mean he will kill himself?" he asked, appalled.

"No choice," Barty said gruffly. "He knows the Prince of Wales will have to be told—and you know what that means."

Auguste did. He thought of the fate that awaited outcasts from society, a miserable life abroad, dishonoured and impoverished. But alive.

"I insist we tell Mrs. Richards *now.*" Auguste rushed to the boudoir upstairs, led there by Amelia's shrieks, and hardly waited for his knock to be answered before he burst in.

"This ain't the Gaiety Girls dressing room, Auguste," Emma yelled.

He did not even hear her. He went straight to Jane. "Your husband, the stone, madam, he has left."

Her face went white, and without a word she rushed past him, hurried down the stairs and outside.

Something was wrong!

"Emma," Auguste cried. "You remember the Silver Banquet? The *bavarois* was too bland. I feel that *now!*"

"How can you talk of food while poor James is so disgraced?" Amelia wailed.

Auguste ignored her, feverishly working out the recipe of the evening. In theory anyone at the table in the dark could have leant across and taken that diamond. But in practice, it was not like that at all.

He ran out of the door, praying he was not too late, and reached the front door just as the colonel was about to climb into a cab, his wife sobbing at his side. "Colonel Richards, I believe you are innocent," he shouted. "Please return."

"You think my wife guilty? Pistols, Didier. You shall die, gentleman or not," Wilhelm barked, as the men flocked into the entrance hall. The ladies hurried down the stairs, and eventually a reluctant James, led by his wife, came back into the house.

"Not the grand duchess," Auguste said. "I believe this whole performance has been a trick." He paused. "A Transmenian trick. Has it not, sir?" he asked its grand duke.

"Didier?" He looked mildly astonished.

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"There were not one but two diamonds."

"Leopold is a magician?" Gerda asked, puzzled.

"Let us say an illusionist, madam. Am I right, sir?"

Leopold shrugged. "I believe Birmingham is excellent at manufacturing such baubles."

"I saw a *diamond,"* Gerda rumbled. "Indian, inferior, but a diamond."

"But what I found on Colonel Richards was a fake."

"Didier, I congratulate you. Your skills of detection are far superior to those of your cooking. The *pêches Victoria* were execrable. Pray tell me what happened to the original stone, if your story is true." Leopold seemed amused.

"You stood up in the dark to propose a toast with a sweeping gesture, so that the guests and their eyes were facing my masterpiece." Auguste kept his voice neutral. "As your hand returned, it took the diamond with it."

"And the risk of being seen, Didier?"

"What risk? You would merely have been removing your own property for security."

"Ach. This man is clever," Wilhelm roared excitedly, though it was not clear to whom he was referring.

"But my dear man, you searched me. Where is the Cavillac if poor James merely stole a Birmingham bauble?"

"On your person, I believe. Before that it remained on the table, probably in the glass from which you were drinking. I have frequently observed that a transparent object in cut glass is all but invisible, especially in some wines, because of the interesting optical illusions provided by liquid. I am sure you have retrieved it by now, however."

"An admirable theory, Mr. Didier, but how could he have put the fake diamond in my sash?" James asked quietly.

"Very simply. It was placed in your uniform in the drawing room before you descended to dinner."

James exclaimed, "Indeed, yes. We were seated side by side. But if I had found it?"

"His Highness would have given an excellent performance of how you must be planning a cunning theft. In either case one objective was achieved. His other objective was to throw possible suspicion on the Grand Duchess in a political, perhaps a personal slur."

Leopold smiled. "My dear man, how could I possibly know in

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advance where dear Gerda would be sitting? I am a guest, not the host."

"Because there was no choice with eight guests. You, as guest of honour, would be on your hostess's left, the Grand Duke Wilhelm as the other highest ranking guest would be on her right. The Grand Duchess, as highest ranking lady, would be on the host's left, which meant the colonel would be next to her, with either his wife or his sister on his left."

"Ah." Leopold paused. "Contrary to what Wilhelm believes, Didier, I am not given to practical jokes. Did I perchance have a motive for these fanciful plots?"

"Yes, sir. Your plan was to carry out the perfect murder. The victim is forced into shooting himself, after being falsely accused of a dishonourable crime and convicted by his friends."

There was an appalled silence broken by Leopold, who threw back his head and laughed. "Admirable. And assuming you are correct in this fantasy, what now, Didier? I have my diamond, but I am sure James will relay your theory to the Prince of Wales, will you not, James?"

"You will return the stone where it rightfully belongs, Leopold—to India." James's voice trembled with emotion. "You will think it therefore honourable to withdraw your request for the princess's hand."

Leopold smiled. "Always so upright, James."

"Always." The colonel's voice was cold.

The clearing up after even the finest banquet was never enjoyable. Emma had departed, and so had her staff; the bones of the ortolans and the soles, the dried sorrel on the soup dishes, the ragged ends of asparagus remained. The Diamond Jubilee had ended in a storm Auguste had not expected, yet he had weathered it. Behind him he heard the door open and turned to see the Grand Duke Leopold, clad in evening cloak and top hat, looking round curiously at this evidence of others' toil.

"You are a clever fellow, Didier."

"Why did you plot this murder, sir?"

"Surely you have a theory?"

"Revenge, sir, for your lost love. Jane Richards preferred a humble colonel to you, a future grand duke. What better way to make her suffer than through her husband's dishonour and death?"

A pause. "Did I ever say my beloved was a woman?" ●

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DUEL AT DAWN

by Edward D. Hoch

George Washington, looming tall and stately in his gold-braided general's uniform, turned from the window overlooking the liberty pole at his Bergen County headquarters and said, "Invisible ink, Mr. Swift. It was known to Ovid as far back as the first century B.C. He suggested writing in new milk, which became visible when touched with coal dust."

Alexander Swift held up the vial Washington had given him. "This hardly looks like new milk, sir, though I will grant you it is white."

"These vials were obtained from Sir James Jay, John's brother, in England. He's a London physician, and after innumerable experiments he perfected a superior form of invisible ink, better than anything the British have." He reached into his desk drawer for a second vial of clear liquid. "I keep the counterpart here. When I wet your letter with a fine brush dipped in this liquid it renders the message visible. Write just a few lines in black ink to allay their suspicions and then write your invisible message on the blank portion of the sheet."

Alexander Swift smiled slightly. "And where will I be writing from, General?"

"I thought you knew. I want you to make another trip into New York City."

As we prepare this issue for press, votes in the annual Readers Award competition are beginning to come in. As in other years, the ballots testify to the overwhelming popularity of veteran Edward D. Hoch. "Amazing" is a description many readers apply—not only because of the author's ability to come up with a good whodunit every month but because of his range and versatility in the genre. As one reader said: "Right on, Mr. Hoch!"

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This was in late August of 1780 and New York was still in the hands of the British. Word had just reached them of a defeat for Washington's southern army in South Carolina, where Cornwallis had routed General Gates at Camden. Earlier in the year, troops from Massachusetts had mutinied over terms of enlistment, and those from Connecticut had done the same over pay and rations. These were trying times, testing Washington's will and skill. He had shuffled commanders and placed General Benedict Arnold in charge of the garrison at West Point, and he had used the civilian Alexander Swift as both spy and surrogate in a number of instances.

But to Swift's ears the news of another venture through the British lines to New York was no sweet music. His former wife still lived there, married to a British officer, and they'd crossed paths on his last visit. That had almost cost Swift his life. "A great many people in New York know me by sight," he told the general.

"There's no one else I can send," Washington said. Swift could see his teeth were bothering him, as they sometimes did.

"What is happening there of such great import?"

"I must know whether the British plan to evacuate the city soon or if they will keep the army there. This will be best known by their preparations of wagons and horses. Are the wagons being repaired, the horses reshod? Are they being collected together for an evacuation? Are the European merchants selling off their goods and packing up? I am concerned especially about Coffin, who keeps a large dry-goods store to supply the officers and army. Inquire also if the fleet from Cork has arrived yet, and how many provisions they carry."

"A big job!"

"I am relying on you," Washington said. "Use the invisible ink and send a letter in care of the Culpers."

Swift knew it to be a safe address maintained by people using the code name Culper. Washington relied on them to pass any letters along to him at once. "It's that urgent?" he asked. "You can't wait until I return from New York?"

"If you learn anything I must know it at once. I cannot take the chance—"

"That I might be captured?"

Washington's eyes met his. "It is always a consideration."

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It was more than two years since Alexander Swift had last crossed the Hudson by night in a small boat. That had been July of '78, and it was also the last time he'd laid eyes on his estranged wife Amanda. Word had reached him last year that their divorce was final, and she had married Major Jack Jordan, the British officer with whom she'd been living.

The sentries along the shore were notoriously lax, especially on a cloudy or moonless night, and Swift's night vision had always been good enough to be guided by the old windmill, a reminder of pre-British days when the city was still New Amsterdam. He beached the boat without difficulty in a wooded grove about a mile north of the docks, taking care to hide it well in the underbrush. It would probably be his only way back to the New Jersey shore.

He was dressed in the clothing of a dock worker, and he dozed on the shore till the first hint of dawn. Then, his shoes still muddy from the marshy shoreline, he ventured along the streets. Only the southern end of Manhattan Island had the look of a city, with a population of some 25,000 people. To the north it was still farmland. He headed south, moving along the streets unnoticed, passing a morning patrol of King George's soldiers without incident. It took him a half-hour to reach his destination and he stopped along the way for a bit of breakfast with the dock workers. A few minutes' conversation answered one of Washington's questions. The fleet from Cork had been sighted off the tip of Long Island and was expected to dock in two days' time, when the tides were right.

Coffin & Anderson's Dry Goods was one of the city's larger businesses. Swift had met Coffin once in the days before the commencement of hostilities, but this day, as he entered the store shortly after eight o'clock, he was more interested in one of the clerks, a former sailor named Edgar Jamison. The man walked with a limp, the result of an accident that had ended his days at sea. Swift spotted him at once, unwinding a roll of muslin for a woman customer. When Jamison had completed the transaction, Swift strolled over to ask a casual question and the man recognized him at once.

"Well, if it isn't Alexander Swift!"

He smiled at Jamison. "Not so loud! Some of your customers might recognize the name."

"What have you done, sneaked through the British lines?"

"Let's just say I'm here unofficially. How have you been, old friend?"

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"Good, most days. The dampness bothers my leg. How is life across the river?"

"Never dull!"

Jamison's weathered face turned somber. "You know Amanda has remarried?"

"I heard that."

"She still shops here on occasion. A lovely woman."

"She always was." Swift fell silent for a moment, then changed the subject. "How has business been? Is Coffin keeping up the stock?"

"Oh yes. If anything, the British are buying more supplies from us."

That was not the news Washington wanted to hear. "I am glad for your sake that the job seems safe. Perhaps we can meet for a beer some night."

"Fine by me. How long will you be here?"

"I don't know."

Edgar Jamison nodded. "Watch out for yourself."

"I will."

Among Amanda's women friends had been one named Elizabeth Short, whose family ran a large livery stable on Wall Street. Swift headed there next, making his way through streets that seemed more crowded with British soldiers than during his last visit. As the August sun rose higher, the day grew warmer, and he could smell the odors of the stable a full block away.

Swift realized he was taking a risk going there, but it was the best possible source for the information Washington required. Before he was even in front of the place he spotted Elizabeth, tall and blond, with a mass of curls at the back of her head. They seemed in stark contrast to the trousers she wore like a man.

She was washing out one of the carriages and at first she didn't recognize him. He had to remind himself that they hadn't seen each other since the English seized the city in '76 and it became a Loyalist stronghold. "Hello, Elizabeth. Don't you have someone to do your scrubbing for you?"

She squinted into the sun, still not knowing him, and then it seemed to come to her. "Alexander? Alexander Swift? Oh my God!" She looked as if she had seen a ghost.

"I'm sorry to startle you like this."

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"Amanda—" she began and then stopped, not knowing how to continue.

"I know about it."

"She and Major Jordan seem very happy." She twisted her hands uncomfortably. "She told me she saw you once, a couple of years back. Are you here to see her again?"

He gave her the best smile he could muster. "No, I came to see you, Elizabeth."

"What for?" She seemed genuinely puzzled.

"Is your father around?"

She lowered her eyes. "Papa died last year."

"I'm sorry to hear that. He was a nice man."

"I'm running the livery now, until my brother gets back."

Her voice had dropped to a mere whisper at the end and Swift guessed what that meant. "Tom is fighting with the Loyalists?"

"Yes. He had no choice. To oppose the English would have meant the loss of the business."

"It was a difficult decision for all of us," he reminded her. "If I had stayed in the city I might have won Amanda back."

"She says you have a woman at West Point."

"Molly. She works at the garrison there," he confirmed. "She has been a great comfort to me."

"We all need that. Now why did you come to see me?"

"I was wondering how your business has been. You were doing a great deal of work for the English officers."

"We still do." A wisp of long blond hair had strayed over her face and she tucked it back in place. "If General Washington wins, I hope we'll be shoeing his horses too."

"Has the shoeing business shown any increase of late? Have your employees been repairing any English carriages?"

Her eyes narrowed as she weighed his questions. "I see," she said after a moment. "You're here as a spy."

"I never use that word."

"You'd better go now, Alexander. I have nothing to tell you."

"All right," Swift said. "Next time you see Amanda, tell her hello for me."

"I expect she and Major Jordan will be in New York for a long time," Elizabeth said, turning back toward the livery stable with her pail and scrub brush.

It wasn't until later that it occurred to him she might have been

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sending a secret message of her own, telling him the English had no plans for evacuating New York.

Late that morning, seated at a corner table in the old City Tavern, Swift wrote a few quick lines to Culper, Jr., commenting on New York's warm weather and the hope that the rebels would lay down their arms before another winter. Then he withdrew the vial of white ink from its hiding place beneath his shirt and carefully began to fill the rest of the page with invisible writing. *"711,"* he wrote, the code for General Washington, *"Corks bobbing on water until Thursday's tide. No other movement here."* When it had dried sufficiently he sealed the letter and took it to a nearby post office. There were few of them around, but Ben Franklin had made great strides since the Continental Congress set up a postal system independent of England in 1775. If the censors didn't delay it, his letter should be in Washington's hands within days.

In the early afternoon Swift headed for the tip of Manhattan Island, where another friend named Mandrone ran a seamen's shop. In the past he had sold uniforms and ship's gear to British officers, and he was in a position to know of any plans for an evacuation of the city, especially by ship. The place was as Swift remembered it, a small crowded shop with a fine view of the harbor.

Felix Mandrone had lost a few pounds and a great deal of hair since Swift last saw him. At that moment he was demonstrating the thrusting power of an officer's sword to a potential customer, but as his eyes fell on his new visitor he seemed to lose interest in the sale. As soon as they were alone he hurried over to embrace Swift. "Alexander! I heard that you were back. What have you done, man?"

"Done? Nothing. How could you have heard I was back? I have been here less than twelve hours."

"Already the soldiers are searching for you. My boy just brought me the news."

A chill ran down Swift's spine. "What news?"

"About Amanda's husband, Major Jordan. He's been killed in a duel."

Felix Mandrone could offer few details about the killing, except that Jordan's body had been found in a field north of Canal Street, in an area sometimes used for duels. He had been shot once in the

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chest, and there was an unfired pistol by his side. "When did they find him?" Swift asked.

"The farmer who owns the field came out just after dawn. He hadn't seen or heard a thing, but there were carriage tracks near the body. The dead man was wearing his major's uniform and the English identified him right away."

"Why are they searching for me?"

Mandrone shrugged. "Somebody saw you, that man Jamison from the dry-goods store where the officers go. He told them you were in there right after eight o'clock."

Swift glanced nervously out the door, searching for English soldiers. "Thank you for the warning, old friend. Don't mention my visit here."

"If you need a boat to take you across after dark—"

"I'll remember your offer."

Swift had only one destination in mind when he departed from Mandrone's shop and headed north. It was the most dangerous place in New York for him to be at that moment, but there was no avoiding it. He had to see Amanda, whether she needed him or not.

His former wife and Major Jordan had a house on John Street, just off Broadway, where he'd secretly visited her two years earlier on a previous mission. He found the place without difficulty, but was unprepared for the carriages and visitors arriving at her door. The news of her husband's tragedy had spread fast among their friends. As he watched from a doorway down the block, Elizabeth Short appeared on the front steps, returning to her carriage, where a driver waited. An English officer Swift didn't know was arriving on horseback at the same time. He had a scar on his left cheek that might have come from a duel. Removing a package from his saddlebag, he took it up to the door with him. Swift circled the block and cut through a small back garden, entering the house through a rear door he'd observed on his previous visit.

From the kitchen he could hear the conversation in the parlor, and he prayed no servant would appear to discover him. "—so good of you to come, Captain Redding. This terrible thing—I'm still in shock."

"Do you have any family, anyone you could go to?"

"No family, but Miss Short has offered to stay with me the next few nights. Are you conducting the investigation, Captain? What can you tell me?"

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"I wanted to ask what you could tell me. The place where Jack was found is notorious for illegal dueling. Another officer was killed there just two months ago. Often the duels are fought with swords, but this was with pistols."

"They say his weapon hadn't been fired."

"That's correct," Captain Redding confirmed. "He'd taken a single shot in the chest, burning a hole in his uniform jacket, but there was virtually no blood. You'll be relieved to know his face seemed at peace, without pain." There was silence for a moment and then the officer said, "This is the unfired weapon that was at his side. Did it belong to him?"

"A flintlock dueling pistol? He never owned such a thing!" Then she backtracked a bit. "At least, not to my knowledge."

"What about enemies? Excuse me for asking, but were there rivals for your hand?"

"My former husband was Jack's only rival."

"We have information that Alexander Swift has been seen in the city this very day."

"I doubt if that's true. Even so, dueling was never his way of settling things. Alexander is much more a man of action. He would use his fists before a dueling pistol."

"Just one more question, Mrs. Jordan. Do you own a carriage?"

"We have a small one, yes. Right now it's having a wheel repaired."

"There were tracks of a single carriage in the damp grass by your husband's body. We found no other tracks. It appears both men, and their seconds, traveled together in the same carriage."

"Why didn't they report what happened?"

"Because a killing in a duel is murder under English common law, even though it's not yet a court-martial offense in our army."

"You believe Jack was killed by a fellow officer?"

"In all likelihood." He gave a small cough.

There was the sound of her moving about. Even now, four years after their marriage ended, he could still picture the nuances of her movement in his mind. "Could I get you some tea, Captain?"

"I cannot impose upon your grief, madam, but a bit of water would refresh me before I leave."

Amanda came through the door of the kitchen before he could move or hide. Her eyes widened at the sight of him and she opened her mouth as if to call for help. He held up his hand,

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imploring her to silence. She hesitated, then walked quietly to the pump and filled a glass with water.

He listened while she returned to the parlor with the water, but she did not betray his presence. After a bit more conversation Captain Redding took his leave. Swift peered around the kitchen door. "May I come out now?"

"What are you doing here, Alex?" his former wife asked. "Is it true that you killed Jack?" She was not yet in mourning, wearing instead a dark green gown that would be suitable for afternoon calls.

"Of course not! You know better than that, Amanda. I would never fight a duel."

She could still light up a room with a flash from her deep green eyes. For a moment he remembered why he had loved her, and why he had lost her. "Not even for me?" she asked with a seductive smile.

"You hardly seem the grieving widow," he observed. "The last time I visited, you were deeply in love with him."

"I made a mistake, not my first nor my last. I would hazard a guess that the duel was fought by an angry husband seeking satisfaction."

"I'm sorry. I had no idea Jack was that sort."

"Nor had I! There were times these past few months when I might have shot him myself." Her eyes blurred with sudden tears, not for her husband but for herself.

He wanted to take her in his arms and comfort her, but he did not. There was no telling where such a move might lead. "What husband might have been most likely to fight a duel with him?" Swift asked, keeping his distance.

"I do not know. One night recently I found long blond hairs on his uniform jacket."

"And the dueling pistol Captain Redding showed you just now?"

"I never saw it before. I'm certain Jack never owned it."

"Then it belonged to the other party in the duel. Or to their seconds."

She reached out to touch his arm. "Alex, you must flee this city. There are those who think you are the most likely person to have shot him."

"Do you believe that?"

She turned away. "No, but everything's confused right now."

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The knocker on her front door sounded again. "That will be another friend come to pay respects."

She nodded. "You had better slip out the back. My cook will return from shopping soon and she mustn't find you here."

He said simply, "Goodbye, Amanda." Then he was gone, as she hurried to answer the door.

It may have been his imagination, but there seemed to be more patrols of English soldiers in the streets as he made his way across lower Manhattan. The original plan had been for him to remain in the city for some days, gathering what further information he could about possible troop movements. Now that plan had changed, and it seemed best to hide until dark and then row back across the Hudson River to the New Jersey side.

Heading north beyond the docks, toward the place where he'd left the rowboat, he found himself once again in the area of Coffin & Anderson's Dry Goods store, where he'd encountered Edgar Jamison that morning. If Jamison was indeed the man who'd reported him to the British, he was someone to avoid at all costs.

As the afternoon drifted into evening Swift found a small public house that served food. While he ate he thought about Amanda's husband. There was a time when his hatred of Jack Jordan might have led to violence, but that hatred had died long ago. He had Molly up at West Point now. Amanda would always be a fond memory, but no longer someone to fight duels over.

He tried to imagine Jordan standing at dawn with his back to his opponent while someone counted off the traditional ten paces. Jordan walking forward, the dueling pistol pointed toward the sky. Jordan turning, aiming, and then being struck in the chest by his opponent's shot.

But he couldn't see it.

He couldn't see it because something was wrong with the picture.

Swift was still puzzling it out as he headed for the boat after eating. The day had turned cloudy with a threat of rain, and dusk was settling in fast. He hoped the waves beginning to churn on the river wouldn't prevent his crossing. Quickly he crossed the muddy stretch of shoreline and began pulling the boat from its hiding place.

"Do not move, Mr. Swift," a sharp voice commanded from behind him, "or you are a dead man!"

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He stood perfectly still and waited until Captain Redding stepped into his line of vision. The officer held a flintlock pistol aimed at Swift's chest. "How did you find the boat, Captain?"

"That was not difficult. A man named Jamison reported seeing you in his shop early this morning. He said there was dried red mud on your boots. River mud. We found your earlier footprints leading away from the boat. I've had men watching the area since afternoon. I was lucky enough to be here myself when you returned."

"If you think I killed Captain Jordan, you're wrong."

"We'll see. I've visited his widow twice today and learned a great deal of useful information. Certainly you had a strong motive for killing him. I've just come from there now—her friend Miss Short is staying the night—and I expect to finish my investigation before the funeral. Regardless of whether or not I can prove your involvement, Mr. Swift, you will be hanged as a spy."

Swift could see two soldiers with muskets standing at a distance. Even if he might have disarmed Redding, there was little chance he could outrun two musket balls. "Let me offer you a bargain, Captain. Give me my boat and a half-hour's start before you come after me. In return I'll give you Major Jordan's killer."

The Englishman laughed at the idea. "I have you, Mr. Swift, and there's no reason I should let you go. Finding the duelist who shot Major Jordan is only a matter of time. Sooner or later one of their seconds will talk about it."

"If it was a duel. Suppose it was something else?"

The officer frowned, uncertain now. "What do you mean?"

"Promise me freedom and take me to the Jordan house. I will show you the murderer."

It took some convincing, but finally Captain Redding procured a horse for him and Swift set off with the Englishman. Two soldiers brought up the rear, leaving Swift to wonder whether the bargain they'd struck would really be honored. Back on John Street, with the coming of twilight, no carriage waited before Amanda's door. If she was spending the night, Elizabeth Short would have sent her driver back to the stable with her vehicle.

It was she who answered Captain Redding's knock. "You're back again," she said, a bit surprised, and then saw Swift with his guards. "What is—?"

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"We have come to see Mrs. Jordan," Redding said quite formally. "Please announce us."

Amanda hurried out of the parlor to greet them. She was still wearing the dark green dress she'd had on earlier, but she seemed to have recovered her composure somewhat. "Alex, what is this? Have they arrested you?"

"The captain is very close to it. I have to persuade him otherwise, and I think I can do that."

Amanda led the captain and Swift into the parlor while Elizabeth brought up the rear. The guards remained by the parlor doors. Swift took a seat facing the others and started right in. "Amanda, I don't believe your husband was shot in a duel. The only evidence for it, really, is the place where the body was found and the unfired pistol by his side. The evidence against a duel is much stronger. Major Jordan was shot once in the chest, but at so close a range that his uniform was burnt around the wound. Certainly that was not from twenty, or even ten, paces away."

"Perhaps the other man cheated," Elizabeth suggested, "and fired before the full ten paces were counted off."

"Then the wound would have been in Jordan's back and not his chest. There's something else too. I heard you say earlier, Captain, that there was virtually no blood. Usually there is considerable bleeding from a chest wound. The implication seems obvious. Not only was Jordan not killed in a duel, but he was not killed where the body was found. The body was transported there in the carriage that left its track in the damp grass. After all, it's hardly likely that both principals and seconds would arrive in a single carriage. Nor is it likely that a dueling pistol would have been left at the scene if the deed was to remain secret. Its absence from its mate would have been readily noticed. No, Captain, there was no duel. Jordan was shot at close range sometime during the night and his body transported by carriage to the infamous dueling grounds at which it was found."

"Then I might have killed him myself," Amanda said in barely a whisper.

"But you did not. You told me yourself your carriage was having a wheel repaired. But you also told me of Jordan's unpleasant affairs with other women. Since it was not a duel, the killer is not necessarily a man. It could have been a spurned lover—a woman with long blond hair like the hairs you found on his uniform jacket."

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Only Swift was prepared for what happened next. Elizabeth Short bolted from her chair and ran toward the tall casement windows at the back of the parlor. But Swift was too quick for her. He was on her, gripping her about the waist, before she was halfway there.

Amanda stared with unbelieving eyes. "Elizabeth? Elizabeth and Jack?"

"I'm afraid it's true," Swift told her as Captain Redding took charge of the prisoner.

"But how did you know?"

"This morning when I stopped by her livery stable she was scrubbing out one of the carriages. I thought it was odd she didn't have an employee doing it, and she seemed almost frightened by my sudden appearance. Of course, it was the carriage she'd used to transport Jordan's body, and she was scrubbing out the blood. It was not a task she could assign to her stable boy or carriage driver."

Elizabeth turned toward Amanda, her face twisted in a grimace of pain. "He said he was leaving you and I believed him. When he backed out and decided to stay with you, I just went for the pistol and shot him."

Amanda's hands were covering her face, no longer able to look at her friend.

A few minutes later, Captain Redding said, "I'll keep my part of the bargain. You'll be escorted to your boat, Swift. But if you're still within sight of shore after thirty minutes my men will fire at you."

"Fair enough. I hope the clouds have made it a moonless night."

It was Amanda who came to the door as he was leaving, asking if she might have a private word with him. Redding nodded and said, "Two minutes only."

She stood very close and whispered the words in his ear. "This is for all of Jack's betrayals. Now I'm betraying him. The British have an American traitor at West Point. I don't know who, but warn General Washington if you can."

Alexander Swift nodded once and hurried off into the night.●

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Missing Baby

by Batya Swift Yasgur

It was every mother's worst nightmare, and it was happening to me.

I had hired Dawn Lawson when I started my job. She'd just moved to New Jersey from Salisbury, Connecticut, but she'd babysat plenty up there, and she had a string of bubbly mothers singing her praises over the phone. Cindy—my baby—took to her right away, and it seemed like a match made in heaven. My job was coming along nicely, my boss Carl was a prince (Was he interested in me or was that just a dream?), and everything seemed as perfect as could be—in the aftermath of a miserable divorce, that is.

Mitch was sceptical, of course. Downright obnoxious, in fact. What did I know about this Dawn person—Just out of high school, practically a kid herself—How dare I get custody, then go gallivanting off to work, leaving his baby in the care of some stranger—On and on.

I shouldn't have been surprised, of course. Mitch had always been obsessed with Cindy. Photographs hanging on his office wall like stars studding a midnight sky, every little squeak and sneeze reported in assiduous detail to his doting parents, Cindy centralized, me peripheralized. When I accepted my job, Mitch stormed into my office, slamming his fist on the desk, demanding my resignation, calling me irresponsible and flighty. Carl didn't listen, bless him, and Mitch was escorted out of the office by the doorman.

Winner of the 1994 Robert L. Fish Award for best short story by a new author, Batya Yasgur has recently published several more short stories in both the mystery and science fiction genres. Her latest project is a series of young adult mystery novels for Orthodox Jewish girls. We believe she has an adult mystery in the works, and we'll let readers know when it becomes available. ✝

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I held out, of course: It wasn't only reasonable but absolutely necessary for me to work, and I didn't like leaving Cindy behind either. In fact, I sat there at work, trying to study the computer screen, but really staring at Cindy's gurgling smile on my desktop photograph, picturing the red-haired Dawn spooning food into Cindy's little mouth, pushing her on the swing at the park, rocking her to sleep. And felt jealousy seep through my system like blood from a wound. That whole nasty custody suit Mitch insisted on dragging into court was stupid and vindictive, and of course the judge threw it right out; no reason for me to be called incompetent to raise my child, I was a perfectly responsible and loving mother, I needed to work and Mitch traveled most of the week anyway, so custody should remain with me.

It all made sense—until that day when I came home to find Dawn gone, Cindy gone, all the baby clothes, diapers, and bottles missing. And felt my heart drop out of my body, shatter on the floor, as I made my frantic calls to the police, as they searched my house, visited Dawn's apartment (empty, she had vacated that morning said the landlord, and no, she'd left no forwarding address), called her parents (they hadn't heard from her, they said). Heard Mitch's agonized screams, his hurled invectives, his roars of fury and grief and "I told you so." His parents' hysterical telephone tirades, their threats, their tears.

And my own sobs as counterpoint.

The police searched and searched: nothing.

The Center for Missing and Exploited Children put her photograph on a milk carton: nothing.

Signs went up all over town—supermarkets, churches, libraries—nothing.

All roads leading to the same dead end.

Until I realized that I had to take matters into my own hands. I must find my baby because no one else would.

I began with Dawn's parents in Salisbury. The golds and reds of autumn mocked me with their hued splendor as I drove through winding roads that called themselves highways to the Lawsons' house.

First, the complaints: "The police were here already; we went through all this weeks ago." Then the relenting—"All right, come on in"—the syrupy sympathy, the "poor dear's." I listened to their answers—no, they didn't know where she was, she was always a

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good girl, this was very strange, they were heartbroken—and didn't believe them. Their hand-wringing, eye-wiping, photograph-brandishing didn't ring true. These people were hiding something, and I had to find out what it was.

So a plan began to take root in my mind. First stop: the Salisbury pharmacy, where I applied for a job; next stop: a realtor, who found me a small apartment. I drove back slowly, dreading what Carl would say when I asked for a leave of absence to investigate my daughter's disappearance.

I needn't have worried. Carl put his arm around me and drew me close for one comforting, glorious moment. "Do whatever you have to. I'll hold the job for you."

The pharmacy, a rambling old-fashioned apothecary, with an ice cream parlor attached to the back, was right next to the post office. I would have applied for a job at the post office itself, but I knew there would be a civil service exam to take, then a wait of weeks, even months, before qualifying, and then perhaps I wouldn't get a job. This was the next best thing to a job at the post office, and daily contact with the Lawsons' mail.

So I endeared myself to the postal workers. Millie, the small schoolmarmish lady who dourly dispensed stamps at the window, would never help me. But Fred was another story: large, genial, teddy-bearish, always with a smile and a chuckle for me. I could count on him, I was sure.

So one day after work, I treated him to ice cream and told him about Cindy, as his eyes grew to saucer size.

And yes, yes, yes! He said he would help. He would let me come in lunchtimes, when the post office was closed for a quaint small-town siesta. Alone, I could browse through the Lawsons' mail.

Nothing the first day.

Nothing the second. Nor the third.

Nothing the first week, nothing the second.

But Monday of the third week—

—there, amid the bills and circulars, one terrifying, magical envelope: pastel blue (it looked like a greeting card). No name; just a scrawled return address:

112 Main Street
Portland, ME

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One call to the police, and I was on my way to Portland, Maine, where my baby's kidnapper was hiding.

And where Mitch's parents lived.

My heart beating, my palms sweating, I walked my shaky knees up the path of 112 Main Street, feeling my stomach flip when I saw a stroller casually parked on the porch. My baby's stroller. The police detective followed suit.

The door was opened by a redheaded young woman and a white-haired old woman. Dawn and my ex-mother-in-law. The kidnapper herself, and the doting grandma.

When they saw me they screamed and tried to slam the door.

But the detective was stronger; he pushed the door open, flashed his badge against their shrieked protests, while I snatched my baby, hungrily gobbling up every little coo, drinking in every whimper and cry. She nestled into my arms—yes, she still remembered me!—and I ran down the path to my car, while the detective was reading Dawn her rights.

It had been Mitch who'd paid Dawn to take Cindy, had told Dawn and her parents that I was a dangerous psychopath who'd managed to pay fancy lawyers to hide an extensive mental history and pull wool over the judge's eyes. Mitch had convinced them that they were saving the baby's life by rescuing her from my destructive hands. The tearful Dawn, my baleful ex-in-laws, and their treacherous son were hauled off to jail.

Carl, true to his word, had held my job; even better, he presented me with a gift upon my return. My own home computer. "I should have thought of this earlier," he said, stroking Cindy's downy hair. "If I had, all this never would have happened. Here; work from your house, and spend your time with your daughter.

"And with me," he added, a tentative hand reaching out to touch mine.

I took his hand and squeezed it, to the music of Cindy's cooing. ●

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CABIN FEVER

by Patrick Irelan

I crept through the darkness to the edge of the woods. The cabin stood in the center of the clearing, its white clapboard siding glowing in the moonlight. An owl hooted somewhere. Everything else was as silent as a log.

I found a spot beneath a maple tree, where its thick leaves hid me from the moonlight. From there I had a clear shot of the bedroom window. Like all the others in the cabin, that window was dark. I stretched out on the ground and waited. To my left, a raccoon and her family came out of the woods, walked across the clearing to the back of the cabin, and climbed into a garbage can.

At eleven o'clock, a car came down the winding lane and stopped in front of the cabin. The lights went off. The engine died. A man got out of the car, walked to the cabin, unlocked the door, and went inside.

One by one, the lights came on, filling the windows with their

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yellow glow. The man opened the windows, and I imagined how the cool night air would feel as it entered the cabin. June bugs began to fly against the screens.

Ten minutes later, another car came down the lane and parked beside the first one. A woman got out. I was surprised to see her in her own car. The time before, she had arrived with the man. She walked quickly to the cabin, her heels clicking on the flagstone sidewalk. She went inside, and the lock clicked behind her.

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They didn't waste any time. The woman entered the bedroom first, followed immediately by the man. Both were in their mid-thirties. Both were a little heavier than the life-insurance charts recommended. Her hair was blond and permed. His was brown and naturally wavy. They stopped in the middle of the room and threw themselves at each other. Their first kiss almost set the place on fire.

Their hands went right to work. She unbuttoned his shirt and slid it off for him. He wasn't wearing an undershirt. He unfastened her skirt and let it slide to the floor. She wasn't wearing any underpants. Both completed these motions with practiced skill. They had done all this before and knew the routine. They were enjoying themselves so much that I felt guilty about what I was going to do.

The man and woman continued to undress each other. Neither was a perfect physical specimen, but what they were doing didn't require perfection. What I was doing didn't either. With the ground supporting my elbows, I aimed carefully and squeezed off the first shot. Then the second. Then the third.

Then the lights went out.

At eight-thirty the next morning, I stood at the window of my office, looking at the abandoned building across the street. Sometimes that building seemed to speak to me, but this wasn't one of

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those times. I went back to my desk and sat down in my old wooden swivel chair. Down the hallway, I heard someone coming up the stairs. Whoever it was had to be coming to see me. My office was the only one in use on the second floor. The third floor had no tenants at all, and that's as high as the building went. There was only one business on the first floor, a Chinese restaurant with the worst food this side of Shanghai.

The footsteps reached the top of the stairs and turned down the hallway in my direction. The steps were loud, probably a man's. They were neither slow nor fast, merely determined. Nothing was going to stop those feet from entering the small, dusty office of the Scofield Detective Agency. I sat up straight and faced the door, which was standing wide open.

The footsteps came to a halt as a large man in a rumpled tan suit stopped in the doorway. He had a long face and a large chin, which bent noticeably to one side. His complexion was dark, his eyes green. "Lieutenant Krebsbach," I said, "what brings the sheriff's best detective to these elegant premises so early in the day?"

"Murder, Scofield. That's what. Murder is the only thing that could force me into this termite-ridden building." He looked around the office with obvious disdain. My ancient desk, file cabinets, and other furnishings didn't strike him as priceless antiques. He sat down across from me and leaned back in the chair. "When are you going to get a decent office in a respectable building?" he said.

"The day after I win the lottery, but since I can't afford to play the lottery, I'm afraid I'll be here a long time." He looked at me without sympathy. "Who got murdered?" I said.

"Phillip Shore."

"Phillip Shore?" I blurted it out, then tried not to look as surprised as I felt.

"His wife told me she'd hired you to follow his movements." His eyes fixed me with an unwavering stare.

"That's right."

"Were you following his movements last night?"

"I was."

"How were they?"

"Energetic."

"When was this?"

"About eleven o'clock."

Krebsbach's gaze found the camera on my desk, the camera

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with the telephoto lens still attached. "I'll bet you took some pictures, didn't you?"

"I took three. Then they turned the lights out. It was very frustrating."

"Sorry to hear it," he said without sincerity. "I'll need the film."

I handed him the camera. He turned it over, depressed the small black button, and rewound the film. Then he opened the camera and put the roll of film into his jacket pocket. "This is your lucky day," I said.

He grunted. "That depends on what's on the film. Shore's wife said she didn't know who the other woman was. Do you?" He set the camera back on the desk.

"Not yet. She was blond, pretty, in her mid-thirties, a little heavy. You'll see her when you get the prints back. All of her."

If this prospect excited Krebsbach, he didn't show it. He just nodded and said, "Where did this rendezvous take place?"

"At a cabin in the woods between Le Claire and Princeton." I gestured vaguely toward the north. "It's a pretty area."

"Not for Shore, it wasn't."

"Where did he get killed?"

"Same general area, at the intersection of two gravel roads. He stopped at the stop sign, and somebody shot him in the head. That's how it looks, anyway."

"Was the woman with him?"

"Not as far as I know. Could you find this cabin again? Shore's wife had no idea where he'd been."

"Sure."

"Show me."

Working in the Quad Cities brings me into contact with a number of law-enforcement agencies on both sides of the Mississippi River. Davenport and Bettendorf on the Iowa side, Moline and Rock Island on the Illinois side, and several smaller towns on both sides all have police departments. In addition, both Scott County, Iowa, and Rock Island County, Illinois, have sheriff's offices. The murder of Phillip Shore had occurred in a rural area in the northern part of Scott County, which is why Lieutenant Krebsbach from the Criminal Investigation Division of the Scott County Sheriff's Office was in charge of the investigation.

I rode with Krebsbach to his office at the courthouse, where he left instructions to have the film developed. Then we headed

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upriver on Route 67 through Davenport, Bettendorf, Riverdale, Pleasant Valley, and Le Claire. It was already hot out. Haze hung over the river. With every mile, the Ford's air conditioner seemed more and more like a gift from a compassionate god.

We didn't talk a lot. Krebsbach wasn't much of a conversationalist. North of Le Claire, we turned left onto a gravel road and drove through the woods. About a mile later, we came to the intersection.

Shore's body was still in the car. The county medical examiner had come and gone, and a crew of evidence technicians was now at work on the body and the car. Sheriff's deputies were searching the grader ditches and the surrounding woods. Local traffic crept by, drivers and passengers gaping at the mayhem.

Krebsbach recruited a deputy to follow us in a patrol car, and we drove another two miles. When we reached the lane, we turned right and drove slowly to the cabin. Shafts of sunlight cut through the hardwood trees on both sides. We parked in front of the cabin and climbed out. The weather hadn't gotten any cooler.

The deputy stationed himself outside the cabin door while Krebsbach and I looked around the clearing. The grass was dry and brown. It hadn't rained in Scott County for eight weeks. A large silver-colored tank of liquid-propane gas stood behind the cabin. The raccoons had pretty well cleaned out the garbage can. I showed Krebsbach the bedroom window, then the maple tree that had sheltered me from the moonlight. I told him everything that had happened, including the steamy parts. His only response was an occasional grunt.

When I stopped talking, Krebsbach said, "Did you get the woman's license-plate number?"

"Yes, I did." I gave it to him, and he wrote it down.

Finally, we went into the cabin. Krebsbach had Shore's keys, so we didn't have to squeeze under the door. "Why do you suppose Shore's wife didn't tell me about this place?" Krebsbach said as we stood inside the door.

"She probably didn't know he owned it," I said. "I had to find it for myself. He bought and sold so much property that no one else could keep track of it. He made a lot of money at it, too."

The cabin contained three small rooms and a bath. We walked through the kitchen to the bedroom, where someone had made the bed. "The bed looks neat," I said, "which shows that the woman must have made it." Krebsbach grunted. A chest of drawers held

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some men's clothing: socks, underwear, a sweater, a pair of jeans. A small closet contained a man's dress shirt, a pair of trousers, a woman's raincoat with a black button missing, a pair of women's hiking shoes, and many unused hangers. We found nothing else in the bedroom.

We went back into the kitchen. A calendar showing the correct month and year hung on the wall near the door. The refrigerator contained five cans of Budweiser. There was no food in the cabin. Shore hadn't used it for dinner parties.

The last room contained three wooden chairs and a small table. A .30-caliber hunting rifle hung on a gun rack. Krebsbach took the rifle down and sniffed the chamber. Then I sniffed it. If our sniffers were working properly, the gun had been fired recently.

Finally, Krebsbach had seen enough. Leaving the deputy on guard, he drove us back to the intersection and told his troops to search the cabin thoroughly. Then he took us back to Davenport, where he dropped me off at Fourth and Brady. "Thanks, Scofield," he said. "We'll handle the case from now on." He gave me a stern look, a look that meant: "Stay out of it."

I got out of the car and bent down to look at him. "Sure thing, Lieutenant," I said. "Thanks for the ride."

Krebsbach drove off toward his office, and I climbed the stairs to mine. The lieutenant was a swell guy, and I wished him all the pleasures life could bring and many years in which to enjoy them. In the meantime, I intended to solve Shore's murder. This was a compulsion I always felt in these situations. Call me a low-down snoop if you want to. I just couldn't help it.

I unlocked the office, turned on the air conditioner, and called Angela Shore's number. Her brother, David Kern, answered. He said that Angela was holding up as well as could be expected. He thought she'd feel well enough to see me the next morning at ten. I asked him to give her my sympathy.

Next I called the Department of Motor Vehicles and gave the clerk the license plate number of the blond-haired woman who had given Shore so much enjoyment. The clerk looked up the number and came back on the line. "The car is registered to James Galetto," she said. She also gave me his address. I thanked her and hung up.

James Galetto. The name sounded familiar. I recalled reading or hearing it in connection with some illegality. It wouldn't be

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hard to find him. The hard part would be staying out of Lieutenant Krebsbach's way. Hard but not impossible.

I leaned back in my swivel chair and sighed happily. I love a good mystery. I love it the way an archaeologist loves a buried city. You keep digging and scraping at it until the truth finally emerges from the dirt.

I stood up and walked to a file cabinet. Krebsbach had been awfully quick in taking my roll of film. I opened a file drawer, took out a folder, and sat back down. Krebsbach didn't know about this folder and what it contained. I felt guilty about not telling him, but not very guilty.

I opened the folder and flipped through a stack of twelve black-and-white, eight-by-ten glossies of Phillip Shore and his blond friend. The photos were clear and crisp. The likenesses were unmistakable. I've been doing this kind of work for a while and I know which end of my Minolta to point at the subject.

Although the photos were acceptable in quality, they lacked one important ingredient. Shore and the blonde were fully clothed. This was a weakness I had tried to correct at the cabin the previous night, but now Krebsbach would get to see the results before I would.

I picked out the four best photographs and put them into a large Manila envelope. Then I locked the envelope in a desk drawer, closed the office, and went to Vigo's Cafe for lunch. I needed plenty of nourishment before spending the afternoon at the library.

After lunch, I walked to the Davenport Public Library. The library occupies a large, white, boxlike building that always reminds me of a refrigerator with windows. Once inside, however, you forget the refrigerator. The interior is open, airy, and well lighted. And the people who work there are more helpful than I'll ever deserve.

I obtained several spools of microfilm and mounted the first roll on a microfilm reader. Starting with a date approximately five years before, I began scanning the *Quad-City Times* for references to James Galetto. It didn't take long to find one.

The first mention of Galetto appeared in the police report for a Friday in July. He had gotten into a fight in a bar and spent the night in jail. Two months later, his name appeared again, this time in connection with a fight in a pool hall. A month after that,

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he bruised his knuckles in an altercation with one of his neighbors.

A nonscientific psychological profile of Galetto began to emerge. He had a violent temper and didn't mind expressing his anger physically. I imagined what he must look like: big, strong, and muscular.

Finally, I came to a front-page story about him. This time he had started a brawl at a bar, and it had taken ten cops to break it up. There at the top of the story was a picture of Galetto being dragged away by two big patrolmen. I took one look and the man I had imagined turned into dust and blew away. The photo showed Galetto to be short, slight, and no more muscular than your average chump. I had been right about one thing, though. The look on his blood-smeared face was that of a very angry man.

I arrived at Angela Shore's white Colonial-style house promptly at ten o'clock the next morning. The house stood in a middle-class neighborhood near Duck Creek Park. It was large, but not a mansion. According to what Angela had once told me, the late Phillip Shore had always avoided a show of opulence, even though he could have afforded it. He believed that if people knew how rich he was, they would assume he was taking advantage of them and would stop doing business with him.

I parked my five-year-old Chevy at the curb and walked to the door. The sun beat down relentlessly. A lawn sprinkler oscillated from side to side. Angela's Buick sat in the driveway, covered with a layer of fine, white dust. A Chrysler stood beside the Buick.

David Kern, Angela's brother, met me at the door. "How is she?" I asked.

"Better," he said. "She was very upset yesterday." His own face showed the strain. The Kerns had always been a close family. One relative's grief was shared by the others. David led me into the living room, then disappeared down a hallway. Angela was sitting on a silk-brocade couch, wearing a black dress and black pumps. Her eyes were red, but she managed a brief smile.

I sat down on a chair facing her. An Oriental rug covered the floor between us. Beyond the edges of the rug, the oak floor gleamed. Oil paintings by local artists hung on the walls. Through the windows, I could see the lawn sprinkler still doing its best.

Angela was about five feet six inches tall. Her dark hair fell to her shoulders in a smooth wave. Her face was soft and unblem-

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ished. When she smiled, her chin shaped itself into a delicate V. Looking at her, I wondered again why her husband had preferred the company of the blond-haired woman in the cabin. In my judgment, Angela was more attractive, but then I wasn't married to her.

"Angela," I said, "I'm sorry to bother you, but I need to ask a few questions. I hope you don't mind."

"That's all right, Mike," she said. "I understand."

"Lieutenant Krebsbach has probably already told you about the cabin north of Le Claire."

"Yes." She nodded sadly.

"Were you aware that Phillip owned that cabin?"

"No, as I mentioned before, he didn't tell me much about his business. He owned more property than you could imagine. I don't know how I'll ever sort everything out."

"Did Lieutenant Krebsbach tell you anything about the other woman?"

"No." She looked down at her hands, which were folded in her lap. "He said he had identified her, but he wouldn't tell me who she was."

"Maybe we can figure it out," I said. "The lieutenant made off with the film I shot night before last, but he didn't know about the pictures I took previously. Do you feel like looking at them with me?"

She took a deep breath, exhaled, and looked up at me. "I might as well," she said. "I'll have to face it sometime."

I stood up and took a picture out of the envelope. It was the least compromising one I had. It merely showed Shore and the blonde talking to each other, fully clothed. I walked across the rug and handed it to Angela.

Her response showed me I wouldn't need the other photos. She gasped and put her hand over her mouth. "My God," she said. "It's Sylvia, Sylvia Galetto."

"How well do you know her?"

"We went to grade school together. I've known her longer than I've known Phillip."

"Do you know her husband?"

"Yes. She started going out with him in high school. I never really liked him."

"Why not?"

My questions had become blunt, but Angela didn't seem to mind.

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"He was too emotional," she said. "He'd get angry about the slightest thing. I lost touch with her after she married him. I didn't like being around him." She stared at the picture a few moments. Then she began to cry. "I never thought she'd do this to me."

I put my hand on her shoulder in a weak attempt to console her. "I'm sorry," I said.

"Thank you." She found a handkerchief somewhere and wiped her eyes. Then she handed the photograph back to me.

"Sorry to bother you," I said, apologizing again.

"That's all right." She attempted another smile but didn't get very far with it.

"I'll show myself out." I started to go, then turned back. "One other thing. If Lieutenant Krebsbach should call, it might be better if you didn't tell him I had these other pictures."

I drove back to the office and called Sylvia Galetto, but she apparently didn't like the sound of my voice. As soon as I told her what I was calling about, she slammed down the phone. I hesitated to go straight to her house. If her husband was home, I might need restorative surgery.

I stared out one of the windows and pondered my options for ten minutes. Then I stared out the other window for ten more. Then I sat at my desk and stared at the wall. No easy solution presented itself, so I locked up and drove down to Telegraph Road in the West End. I parked a block from the Galettos' white cottage, took my binoculars out of the glove compartment, and brought the house into focus.

I immediately saw that my anxiety about combative little James Galetto was at that moment unnecessary. He had other things to worry about. The white house and its small yard were bulging with deputy sheriffs. I got out of the car and walked down the sidewalk for a closer look.

I joined a group of onlookers two doors from the Galetto house and waited for the forces of good to triumph over the forces of evil. Good had a clear numerical advantage at that moment, so I had no reservations about the likely outcome.

A few minutes later, Lieutenant Krebsbach came out the front door, followed immediately by a squad of deputies and, in handcuffs, James Galetto. Galetto was wearing a pair of blue jeans and nothing else. No shirt, no shoes. He was short and wiry and, I suspected, as quick as a fox. One of the deputies had a bloody nose,

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and I knew it had nothing to do with how dry the air was. The last deputy to emerge carried a .30-caliber hunting rifle with an evidence tag dangling from the trigger guard. This was the second rifle Krebsbach and his officers had found, the first being the one at Shore's cabin in the woods.

While three city cops directed traffic and kept the spectators at bay, the deputies hustled Galetto into the backseat of a patrol car. The car pulled away, followed by another. The remaining deputies turned to commiserate with the man with the bloody nose. The city cops walked over to extend their sympathy. Krebsbach looked at the man's nose and told him to go to the emergency room, an idea the deputy resisted until Krebsbach told him it wasn't optional. He had to go.

With that issue settled, Krebsbach and the deputies climbed into their cars and drove away. The city cops did the same. By then, the spectators were laughing and joking. Two boys began a mock fistfight. The adults headed back toward their houses. People on their porches walked back inside. Finally, everyone but me had drifted away.

I stood there on the sidewalk, staring at the cottage's fake green shutters, green shingles, and white clapboard siding. During all the excitement, one important character in this drama had failed to appear—Sylvia Galetto.

I looked around. Telegraph Road was as quiet as a tavern on Sunday morning. No one else was in sight. No one would stop me. I walked down the sidewalk to the white cottage and knocked on the door.

A moment later Sylvia Galetto appeared from the back of the house. She had on a pair of red jogging shorts and a T-shirt. "Now what?" she said as she looked at me through the screen door. She obviously thought I was another police officer. It's the J. C. Penney suit that always fools them. I didn't bother right then to correct her misapprehension. I wanted to get inside first.

"I need to ask you a couple of questions," I said.

"All right, come on in," she said. She didn't open the screen door, so I did it for myself. She walked across the beige carpet, sat down on a dirty white couch, and lit a cigarette. She didn't invite me to sit down, but I did it anyway, in a blue easy chair that formed a right angle with the couch. The chair, the couch, and a coffee table were the only pieces of furniture in the small living room. There was also a large color television set. I didn't see any books.

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The chair wasn't very comfortable, but I didn't complain. I felt lucky to have gotten into the house at all. "Why didn't you ask your questions when all the other cops were here?" she asked.

"Actually, I'm not a cop," I said. "I'm a private detective."

"Then I don't have to talk to you."

"That's true, you don't, but I just want to help."

"I'll bet." She inhaled deeply and blew smoke at the ceiling. "Who are you working for?"

"I can't say."

"What's your name, or can't you say?" She smirked as she said this.

"Michael Scofield," I said. "Would you mind answering a couple of questions?"

"That depends."

"On what?"

"The questions." She took another puff on the cigarette and blew the smoke in my direction.

This response wasn't entirely negative, so I asked the first question. "Why did they arrest your husband?"

"Because he punched one of the deputies."

"Didn't they have an arrest warrant?"

"No, just a search warrant, but Jim flew off the handle and started swinging anyway. That's when they arrested him. He always does something like that. He has a terrible temper."

"What were they looking for?"

"A gun. They found one, too."

"Do you think he killed Phillip Shore with it?"

"I don't know." She took another puff and tapped the ashes into a plastic ashtray on the coffee table.

"But he does have a bad temper."

"That's what I just said."

"Bad enough to kill?"

"I don't know."

"Bad enough to hit his wife?"

"No. He doesn't do that."

"Why did you get involved with Shore?"

"That's one of the questions I won't answer."

This reply didn't surprise me. I could see, though, why Shore had gotten involved with her. Up close, she looked different than she had through the lens of my camera. What had looked chubby now looked attractively fleshy. Her face was youthful and unlined.

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Her lips pouted like a French movie star's. "How have you been getting along with your husband?"

"That's another question I won't answer."

"Were you with your husband the night of Shore's murder?"

"No."

"Where were you?"

"I can't say." She smirked again. I was getting tired of her coyness.

"How well do you know Angela Shore?" I asked.

"I used to know her very well, but I don't see her much anymore."

"Why not?"

"She was too snooty when I married Jim. Then she married Phil Shore, and that put her in a higher social class."

"Did that offend you?"

She took another puff and snuffed out the cigarette in the ashtray. "Yes," she said.

"Is that why you had an affair with her husband?"

The coyness went out of her face. The smirk went with it. "Get out," she said.

I got out.

As I drove back downtown, I thought about Sylvia Galetto. For someone who had been so passionately involved with Phillip Shore, she didn't seem all that upset about his death. She appeared to be more annoyed than anything else, but maybe she was hiding her true feelings.

I went upstairs to my office and called the sheriff's department, then waited as a woman transferred my call. "Krebsbach," a voice finally said.

"Lieutenant," I said, "how's the Phillip Shore investigation coming? Any suspects?" I feigned ignorance of the incident at the Galetto house.

"Yeah, we have a suspect." Krebsbach sounded irritated, but tried to be civil. I had helped him, and he knew it.

"Who is it?" I said. Sylvia Galetto had shown me the value of coyness.

"We're not ready to announce his name yet, but he has a motive, a weapon, and no alibi. We just brought him in for questioning. If we charge him with anything, you can read about it in the newspapers."

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"Did you recover the slug that killed Shore?"

"Yes, it's a thirty caliber. Now all we have to do is wait for the lab to match it with the rifle."

"Sounds like you've solved the case already. Good work." I'm not above using flattery to get information.

"Uh-huh."

"Any other suspects?"

"Everyone and no one. Maybe you did it." My flattery hadn't worked. It was time to retreat.

"Thanks, anyway," I said. "Just curious."

"You're welcome, Scofield."

I stood at the window of my office, staring at the abandoned building across the street. It stood there staring back, a steel fire escape zigzagging down its brick face. I depended on that old building to provide inspiration with difficult cases, but it didn't always work. I got a Beck's Dark out of the fridge and returned to the window.

I drank the beer and waited until the building whispered something I couldn't quite understand. I drank another beer, and the building spoke louder. Another beer. The building spoke even louder, and this time I heard it: David Kern. I needed to snoop on Angela's brother.

But first I had to sober up. I walked to Vigo's Café, where I consumed a chicken sandwich, a piece of apple pie, and three cups of black coffee. I didn't hurry. Speed wouldn't bring Phillip Shore back to life.

I looked around the café. The thing I liked about it, in addition to the food, was its appearance, which hadn't changed much in the twenty years I had been going there. There was a lunch counter on one side, booths on the other side, and tables in between. The plate-glass windows in front gave the place a bright, cheerful atmosphere.

A round mirror hung on the wall behind the cash register, from where at that moment Vigo was surveying his domain. Vigo himself hadn't changed much in twenty years either. He had a large head, a bushy moustache, and a big stomach. He also had an uncanny ability to arrive at your table with a pot of coffee just when your cup registered empty.

At Vigo's invitation, I considered having a fourth cup, but decided against it. I didn't want to bounce off the ceiling as I

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walked out. After paying the bill, I strolled back to the car and drove to David Kern's neighborhood on the north side of town.

Kern was about five years older than his sister Angela. He and I had gone to high school together, although we hadn't been close friends. He was about five-ten and starting to put on weight. His complexion was pale, his features unremarkable. Like me, Kern was divorced.

He lived in a ranch-style house that was about as bland as Kern himself. It had brown siding, a low-pitched roof, and a picture window. The concrete driveway was as big as a helicopter pad. I parked a block away and got out my binoculars.

Kern owned a couple of clothing stores in the Quad Cities, although neither seemed to have much business. He employed managers at both of them, so I wasn't surprised to find him at home in the middle of the afternoon. His white Chrysler stood on the helicopter pad, ready to lift off when needed.

I sat in my car for the rest of the afternoon, waiting for something to happen. Nothing did. At six o'clock, I found a fast-food joint and clogged my arteries with hamburger grease. Then I went back to Kern's block and waited some more.

The sun went down and the sky began to darken. The moon rose and the streetlights came on. Lights came on in the houses, too, including Kern's. At nine o'clock, he came out through the garage, climbed into the Chrysler, and drove away.

I followed him to Route 67, where he turned left and drove upriver toward Le Claire. He might have been on the way to a fish fry, but I doubted it. North of Le Claire, he turned left onto a familiar gravel road and drove through the timber.

I gave him plenty of room. I knew where he was going anyway. When he turned down the lane, I followed with the lights off. Halfway there, I turned down a logging road, parked well out of sight, and ran through the woods to the cabin.

By the time I got there, he had all the lights on. I stopped near the edge of the clearing and watched through the binoculars. He seemed to be looking for something, though probably not the rifle. Anyone would know that that was the first thing the sheriff's detectives would take. He walked into the bedroom, looked around for a while, and walked back out. He opened and closed the kitchen cabinets. He looked everywhere he could. If he found anything, I didn't notice, although I couldn't see every move he made.

Finally, he turned off the lights and came back outside. The

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moon shone down, illuminating Kern, the cabin, and the car. I saw nothing in his hands. He put nothing into the trunk or the backseat. Whatever it was that he wanted, I didn't think he'd found it.

I spent the next day looking for people, following them, and watching what they did. I used to have more faith in my fellow citizens, but my profession has made me suspicious. Find a dead body and you can't trust anyone.

At ten o'clock that night, I found myself looking at a cabin through the viewfinder of my Minolta, a different cabin this time. It stood on the banks of the Mississippi north of Le Claire. The moon spread its silver light on the river. The mosquitoes were thicker than divorce lawyers. Beyond the cabin, a towboat pushed a line of barges upstream, its running lights glowing in the darkness.

The man and woman in the cabin were already entangled in each other. Both were as naked as blue jays. I took one picture after another, until I had enough to open a porn shop, not that I intended to do that. I had another purpose in mind. The lights in the bedroom eventually went out, and I drove back to town. The folks at the Blackhawk Photo Lab didn't know it yet, but they would have a rush job waiting for them first thing in the morning.

The pictures turned out fine—sharp and crisp, good contrast, excellent detail. I felt downright proud as I showed them to Krebsbach, and he liked them, too. At three o'clock that afternoon, the Scott County Sheriff's Office and the Davenport Police Department simultaneously executed two search warrants—one at the cabin by the Mississippi, the other at a house in Davenport. At the cabin, they found a .30-caliber hunting rifle, the third such weapon discovered in the investigation. At the house, they found a black button from a woman's raincoat.

That evening, I sat in Sylvia Galetto's living room, reviewing the details of the case. Jim Galetto wasn't home. He was at a bar somewhere, celebrating his vindication. I hoped he wouldn't start a fight with anyone, but the odds weren't good.

Sylvia was much nicer this time. She made me a cup of weak coffee and served it with a piece of dried-out cake. I sampled both and set them back on the coffee table in hopes they would vanish.

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"I had some doubts about Angela from the beginning," I said. "You always wonder about the spouse when a murder occurs. Any cop knows that. Then the day after the murder, I noticed that Angela's car was covered with gravel dust, dust that could have collected while driving out to that intersection to kill her husband."

Sylvia nodded, but said nothing. She was waiting for the good part.

"But by itself, that didn't prove anything," I said. "There are plenty of other gravel roads where a car could collect dust. I needed more evidence than that, so I decided to keep an eye on Angela's brother, David Kern. I knew he'd do almost anything for her. I followed him out to Phil's cabin and watched him search the place. He had to know the police would take the rifle Phil kept there, so what was he looking for? Phil's clothing maybe, or maybe the two pieces of women's clothing—a pair of hiking boots and a raincoat with one black button missing."

Sylvia looked puzzled. "What difference did that make?" she said.

"Perhaps it made no difference at all," I said, "but I had wondered all along about those hiking boots. Forgive me for saying this, but I know why you went to that cabin, and it wasn't to hike. Who else could have left those things there? Angela claimed that she had never been to the cabin, that she didn't even know Phil owned it. Which meant that she could not have known where to wait in hiding to ambush him."

"I see what you mean," Sylvia said.

"But what if she was lying?" I said. "What if she forgot about the boots and the raincoat until after the murder? Someone would have to go get them, someone like her dutiful brother, although I don't know what reason she gave him or how much he knew about the killing. Unfortunately for him, the police had already taken both the coat and the boots. Unfortunately for Angela, she didn't have the presence of mind to throw away the missing button from the raincoat, a button that proves the coat was hers and that she did know where the cabin was."

"But why did she murder Phillip in the first place? Was she that jealous about our affair?"

"No. She wasn't jealous at all. She had a boyfriend of her own, as I discovered last night at a cabin by the river north of Le Claire. She killed Phillip for the money. A divorce would have

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given her part of his fortune, but his death would give her all of it. She already knew who his lover was, but she pretended not to, hoping this apparent ignorance would divert suspicion away from her. She only hired me to make sure someone else knew about your affair with Phillip, someone who would tell the police. She knew that because of Jim's legendary temper, the police would immediately suspect him of the murder. And they did."

"Which is why they came here looking for a rifle," Sylvia said.

"That's right," I said, "but I doubted all along that Jim was guilty of the murder. He gets into fights all the time, but he's never used any weapon but his fists. He's the kind of guy who gets angry and starts swinging on the spot, not the kind who plans his violence in advance."

I sat back in the chair and stopped blabbing. Sylvia smiled at me. "You're so smart," she said.

"Not really," I said. "I just notice things that other people don't." She smiled again. I had said all that I came to say, so I stood up to go before she could offer more cake and coffee. Sylvia stood up also, and walked with me to the door.

"You're cute, too," she said.

We stopped at the door. She looked up at me. I looked down at her. An image of her husband flashed through my mind. "I know," I said, "and I want to stay that way."

Sex and money. If we could remove those two elements from the human equation, the murder rate would drop to almost zero. What else is worth killing for?

Lieutenant Krebsbach had a lot of pointed questions for both Angela Shore and her boyfriend, who turned out to be an old friend of her husband's. It also turned out that their love would not endure forever, or even for a day. They began accusing each other of the murder, setting off a contest to determine who could tell the best lies. It came as no surprise when the crime lab later matched their rifle with the slug that killed Phillip.

The whole case was well out of my hands by then. I had done everything I could for truth and justice. Now all I had to do was collect my fee from Angela, although I knew that would take a long time and enrich my lawyer. In the meantime, there would always be more secluded cabins, more torrid love affairs, and more pictures to take.

Sex and money. What would I do without them? ●

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One Night

by Jacklyn Butler

Ralph and the kids ate efficiently. No smiling or talking during meals in this family. Can't waste more than ten minutes on dinner around here. Polly toyed with her own dinner while a song got stuck in her head:

"Polly put the kettle on,
Polly put the kettle on,
Polly put the kettle on,
We'll all have tea."

A resident of Berkeley, California, Jacklyn Butler has a number of published short stories to her credit. Her work has appeared in the annual anthology *The Year's Best Mystery and Suspense Stories,* and she is a former nominee for the Private Eye Writers of America's Shamus Award.

She hummed the song as she cleared the table. The dishwasher was too full. They could damn well have started it after breakfast. She couldn't do it herself, she had to leave before they finished eating. She rearranged plates, cups, trying to get everything in. It would be nice to come home just once and find an empty dishwasher; she jammed cups on top of plates, rattled the dishes to broadcast her irritation. Ralph was so fussy about letting things touch, but he never did anything about it except crab if something got chipped. The song began to change:

"Polly does the dishes,
Polly makes the bed."

She got the last cup in, added the soap, and pushed the button as she finished:

"Polly's such a sweetheart
Everybody said!"

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She walked out into the family room where Ralph sat on the love seat between the two kids, eyes glued to the beginning of an old *Star Trek* rerun. Polly stood behind them, sniffed Ralph's cologne. Men shouldn't douse themselves, all it did was make you think about what they were trying to cover up. She listened to the familiar *Star Trek* theme, was mesmerized for a moment by the stars streaming by. She woke herself up as the music faded and Captain Kirk began to confer with Mr. Spock.

"All right." Polly spoke loudly enough to be heard over the program. "If you want to watch *The Next Generation* at eight, you better do your homework now."

"Oh, Ma—" Timmy moaned.

"You know the rules."

"This is one we never saw," Marcia said.

"One hour a night."

"Dad—" Timmy wailed. "You promised—"

"Quiet!" Ralph ordered. "I want to watch this. We'll discuss it later."

She was so angry she was actually trembling. The kids had figured a way out of her one-hour-a-night decree: Marcia wanted *Star Trek* reruns, Timmy insisted on *The Next Generation*. No point in arguing until she got herself under control. She sat down heavily on a side chair and watched an evil alien force kidnap Captain Kirk. The song kept running as if she had a tape in her head:

"Polly goes to work each day
To earn her daily bread.
Polly hopes her family
Will all drop dead!"

Oh God, she thought. Don't let me think things like this! Polly stared at the screen, tried to get into the show, to believe that the crew would not notice that Captain Kirk was missing. When Mr. Spock asked where he was, Mr. Sulu said he must have gone to the bathroom, or maybe to take a nap. It was incredible to think how she used to enjoy this stuff. Boring, worn out, like her life.

The el had been slow, crowded, she'd stood up most of the way home, then she'd found breakfast dishes in the sink and Marcia had forgotten to set the table for dinner. Too tired to argue about it, Polly had done it all herself while dinner was in the microwave.

After she bashed them to death, she would kill her husband.

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Of course she would never—

People did kill, all the time. When it was done, it was done.

Maybe she was going off her wire.

She would hate to go to jail. There were ways to do it and get away with it. Unsolved crimes every day in the news.

She had to stop thinking things like that. Polly tried to concentrate on the screen, which was showing a lively commercial for a soft drink.

What gave these people the right to drive her to murder? Why not just walk out, leave them with their dirty dishes and mind-numbing television?

In the bedroom closet she found a backpack, put in a nightgown, toothbrush, makeup kit. Her blazer and shoulder bag were still on the bed where she'd dumped them in her hurry to get dinner on the table. She put on the jacket and the backpack, slung the strap of her bag over her shoulder, and started out the door. Then she turned back, shoved her wallet in the pocket of her slacks, and left her bag on the bed for Ralph to go through before he called to report her missing. The dishwasher was starting the first rinse, Captain Kirk had been conscripted to fight in an alien army while the crew continued to fly the Enterprise without him. Polly went out the back door, through the yard, running into the night to get away from what she might do if she stayed.

A block away she crossed Main Street; Thursday night, stores open until ten, lots of people out. Most adults worked, had to shop evenings, weekends.

She walked under the el into an area that was dark, deserted after Main Street. A couple of little street lamps, the closest thing to a bright spot the discreet marquee of the Carleton Hotel. Only one person in sight, a man coming toward her. Suddenly the man was deliberately blocking her way; he was going to mug her. In panic, she tried to walk around him, but he grasped both her arms in a firm grip. She opened her mouth to scream, and he turned her face away from him, held her with his left arm tight across her chest while he covered her mouth with his right hand and pushed her off the sidewalk onto the lawn.

"Just shut up and listen!" He moved his hands and held her shoulders so tight it made her wince, then he turned her around to face him. "I'm not gonna hurt you." He shook her slightly. "Understand?"

"I—I—" Polly started to focus on the face close to hers, then

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turned aside, too terrified to answer. She squirmed under his hands and tried to move away, felt the rough bark of a tree against her back.

"Look. I know they're after me. I want to be sure this gets to Nora." He released his hold on her, held her right hand in his left, forced it open, and dropped a small package into it, closing her fingers around it. "No matter what happens to me. She lives at—"

He stopped as a car came down the street. He quickly darted away, down a small alley.

The car slowed, made a U-turn, and sped down the alley, tires screeching. After a moment she heard a scream and a volley of shots, then the car came back, slowed as it passed, and there was another volley of shots that ricocheted off the tree and building behind her. The car disappeared down the street.

Polly stood paralyzed, then began to tremble violently and dropped the package. She heard sounds from the nearby houses; porch lights came on. As sirens approached, Polly recovered enough to pick the package up and put it in her pocket before she became blinded by flashing lights. Police swarmed into the alley. As they passed, Polly slipped behind the tree, then hurried down the street and into the entrance of the Carleton. Everything peaceful; word of a killing in the neighborhood had not yet reached them. She was still trembling as she approached the desk, but the clerk did not seem to notice.

"We're full," he said. No beds available for terrorized women. He studied her for a moment, seemed to recognize her distress. "Look, we have one person who was supposed to check out. Let me call him—" He pushed buttons on the phone, spoke to someone. "Okay. He's ready to leave for the airport. It'll take awhile to straighten up. If you want to wait in the lobby, or the coffee shop, I'll call you soon as it's ready."

"Coffee shop," she said. "Ask for Polly."

As she crossed the lobby, two police officers entered and walked to the desk.

The coffee shop was small, little tables dimly lit by lamps shaped like candles under tiny shades, perfect place to cool down. She slid into one of the booths, dropped the backpack on the seat, and began thinking about Ralph and the kids and what she was going to do about it all. Tomorrow she'd go to work in these same clothes, but she'd have to get home, get some others. Find a place to live closer to work, get rid of the long commute. Maybe she'd

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just buy new clothes, never go home. Not get into any arguments, not let them try to talk her out of it. Be civilized; no histrionics.

She ordered a glass of wine, sipped it slowly, tried to clear her head by focusing on the others in the shop. A woman with two small children indulging in ice creams. The kids were having a ball; they were still at a nice age. Hers had been fun to be with until they got into school. After the children left she watched a couple eating hamburgers while they sparred with each other. This must be their first date, maybe a blind date. Polly smiled, watching the woman trade some of her potato chips for his pickle. They discussed who should pay the check, walked out chuckling over some private joke. Polly wondered where they were going, maybe a movie, or a room upstairs. She and Ralph had done stuff like that before—

She still had time to kill, ordered another glass of wine. Ralph must have noticed her absence by now, probably had not reported it yet. He'd assume she'd gone to visit one of the neighbors. Maybe he'd even phone Millie, the neighborhood know-it-all; that would let the whole town hear she had walked out on him. She'd be in her room in the Carleton before he called the police. Maybe the shooting had been on the news—maybe they'd interrupt *Star Trek* to report it.

A man came into the coffee shop, followed by one of the policemen. The man sat at the table next to hers, ordered coffee. The policeman talked to the counterman for a moment, then approached her table.

"We've had a shooting in the vicinity. We're looking for a witness. Did you see or hear anything unusual?"

Startled, Polly shook her head. He stared at her for a moment and she wondered if he could read her mind, but he moved on to the man at the next table. "We have a report of a witness who has disappeared," the officer said.

"I can't help you," the man said.

"Sorry to bother you." The officer stared at Polly again, then turned toward the door. "Routine neighborhood check."

Polly swirled her wine, stared at it, waiting for her heart to stop pounding. After a few moments, the man moved to her table.

"Do you mind if I talk to you for a moment?" he asked.

"Please—" she started to refuse.

"I'm not trying to pick you up. Honest." He grinned at her. "I just want to talk."

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He was about her age. Looked a little like Ralph, only cuter, same high forehead under receding mouse-colored hair, but his eyes were brown instead of green and he had dimples in his cheeks and chin. He was clean-shaven; Ralph had a moustache. Suddenly the idea of a companion seemed welcome.

"Okay," she said.

"Thanks." He sat down across from Polly, held out his hand. "I'm Jonathan."

"Polly." His hand was warm and dry.

"I—I promised myself I'd talk to a woman tonight," he explained. "Just three weeks ago, I was divorced. A judge pronounced us no longer man and wife with a tap of a gavel." He signaled to the waiter. "Ten years wasted; nothing to show for it."

"I'm—I'm sorry."

"I gave myself two weeks to recover. They say the best treatment after you've been thrown is to get on another horse right away."

"I'm the first woman you've spoken to?"

"Except at the office. I mean, you know—"

"Socially?"

"Yeah. I gave myself an extra week when my wife remarried the next day."

Listening to this run-of-the-mill, mundane problem settled her down, brought her back to earth. The waiter put the man's coffee cup on the table, filled it.

"No children?" Polly asked.

"Two."

"So you do have something to show for it."

"I don't count on seeing them too often." The dimples had vanished; his face looked old, exhausted. "She wants me to let their stepfather adopt them, so they'll have a normal life." He held up both hands, wiggling two fingers on each to indicate quotation marks around "normal life."

"Will you?"

"Haven't decided. I'm not sure this marriage will work either."

"Maybe you just hope it won't."

"Yeah. I keep praying it'll be a disaster." He thought for a minute. "Then I hate myself."

"Why? You want her back?"

"Hell no. It would never work after all that's gone on. I just wish I'd tried harder back when we started bickering about silly stuff."

Was arguing about homework and TV silly? Polly sipped her

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wine. "I wonder if God has lousy days too," she said, thoughtfully. "Gets tired and grouchy, doesn't give a damn."

"Takes an earthquake or a tornado to get it out of his system?"

"Yeah. Then is sorry about it afterwards."

He was smiling again. "If that happens, I'm at least partly responsible."

"I've done my share," she said.

"You? I don't believe it."

"I just left my husband because I was terrified." She felt free to talk about it; he'd shared his problem with her.

"Did he hurt you?"

"Oh no! I was afraid I'd kill him."

He caught the waiter's eye and pointed to his empty cup. "How were you planning to do it?"

"Bash his head in. After I'd killed the kids." Polly watched Jonathan nod as if it was okay to kill your family.

"I wanted to kill my wife lots of times." He paused as the waiter refilled his cup. "I even bought a gun. It would've been easy to do."

"You'd be caught—"

"I figured I'd just throw the gun in the lake."

"Isn't the gun registered?"

"Sure. But I'd just say it got lost. The police might suspect, but without the murder weapon they could never prove anything. And none of my friends would believe I did it." He smiled and the dimples deepened again. "It would be even easier for you."

"You mean, I could use your gun and throw it in the lake after—"

"All you'd have to do is to wash your hands good to be sure there's no residue, then get ready to accept the condolences of your friends."

Polly could picture Millie sympathizing with her over the loss of her family. She shuddered.

Jonathan smiled at her. "Isn't it awful to think about killing somebody? It's like the terror comes from inside, so you can't get away from it. It's worse than worrying about getting killed."

"I know. I just got shot at."

"You're the unknown witness? Why didn't you—?"

"Tell the policeman? I'm not sure. I think he knew I was lying."

"I doubt it. He said it was part of the routine investigation. But if you could describe the car—"

"It was dark, I was terrified. I don't even know if it was dark or white. A van or a compact."

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"Typical suburban housewife! Lousy witness."

"I didn't even get a good look at the man they shot." She closed her eyes for a moment. "And they would take my name—maybe even be on the news—"

"And you're trying to run away." He sighed. "It's easy to see why these gangland killings go unsolved. They come in, shoot, and disappear before anybody wakes up. No clues."

Polly took the package from her pocket. Now she noticed it was a gift; wrapped in silver paper. "The man gave me this before he—before they shot him."

"My God, woman! That *is* evidence! What is it?"

"I don't know. He said it was for Nora—started to give me her address, then the car came and he ran into the alley. Maybe her address is inside."

Polly turned the long, narrow package around in her hand, began to fumble, removing Scotch tape, paper. A grey, flocked jewelry box emerged. She opened it, and gasped at the diamonds lying on red velvet.

"Jesus!" the man said. "Is it real?"

Polly nodded. "Looks like it. It's what they call a tennis bracelet. Diamonds and platinum. Probably cost plenty."

The man held it in his left palm, moved it close to the small candle lamp, where it sparkled. The waiter came up with more coffee. He stared at the bracelet. "He must love you a lot, lady," he said. He filled the cup again and moved away.

"I suppose I have to take it to the police. Maybe this will help identify him or something."

"They can ID him from the body, I'm sure. I'd call this a case of finders keepers, Polly."

"Maybe he stole it?"

"Probably not. It's gift-wrapped."

Polly sighed, picked up the bracelet, placed it against her wrist.

"The waiter is right. He must have loved this Nora a lot."

Jonathan nodded. "Afraid she'll never know that."

"I'd like to take it to her, but I don't know where she lives—or even what her name is!"

Jonathan reached out, lifted her hand, and touched the bracelet gently. "He probably didn't pay cash for this, Polly."

Polly picked up the box. "It's the Jewel Box Store." She looked at her watch. "It'll still be open."

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"Want to go talk to them? I'll go with you. Just let me get our checks." He signaled the waiter.

"I can't leave. I'm waiting for a room."

"Probably not a good idea, anyhow. We show up with that bracelet, they'll call the police, accuse us of stealing it."

The waiter brought the check; Jonathan put money on the table. "You wait here—I'll call the Jewel Box."

Jonathan returned in a few moments.

"The jewelry store was still open. I told them I was the police; they'd just heard about the shooting and were about to call the station. They told me all about it. The bracelet cost twenty-five hundred, seventy-nine fifty with tax and gift wrap. The customer gave them two grand in hundred-dollar bills, charged the rest to a Master Card issued to Jasper Smith, 1798 S. Grove."

"We still don't know who Nora is," Polly said. "He bought this for her." She moved her wrist so that the bracelet made the light dance into her eyes. "Look. Could you see if he has a phone? I don't want to leave the coffee shop."

Jonathan was gone a long time; she had begun to worry when he returned. "There are four phones listed under J. Smith, one at 1798 Grove. I called the number and got an answering machine that announced neither Jasper nor Nora can come to the phone right now." He put a large brown envelope and some hotel stationery on the table. "I got these from the desk clerk."

Polly took the bracelet off and put it in the box, handed it to him. He put it in the envelope, wrote Nora Smith and the address on it. "Want to enclose a note?" he asked.

Polly wrote on the stationery: "Jasper wanted you to have this." She folded it, handed it to Jonathan. "Do you think this will get me in trouble?"

Jonathan shook his head. "The police would not be happy about it. But I doubt Nora'll take this to the cops." He put the note and the box in the envelope and sealed it. "How much do you think this weighs?" He got a book of stamps out of his wallet.

"Half a pound?"

"Okay. I'll put ten stamps on it, just in case."

The desk clerk appeared at the door to the shop. "Polly?" he called. "Your room is available."

"I'm coming." Polly started to leave, then turned back to Jonathan. "I'd like to mail that myself."

"Of course." He handed her the package and rose. "Thank you,

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Polly," he said. "In all the excitement, don't forget this represents a milestone for me. I'd forgotten what it's like to talk intelligently to a woman."

She felt close to this man, something quite powerful. "Next time, try for a pickup." She'd better get out of there. "Look, don't let him adopt your kids."

"You think they might—"

"Absolutely. They'll need you a lot."

He handed her a business card. "Next time you feel an urge to kill him, give me a call. I'll meet you for a drink." He chuckled. "I'll bring my gun, just in case you want to use it."

"Thank you," she said. She put the card in the pocket of her slacks. "Good luck with the pickup."

She told the man at the desk she'd changed her mind. She thanked him and walked out into the night, clutching the package to her chest.

She'd punished them enough.

She dropped the package in the first mailbox she passed. She thought about Nora, weeping for her Jasper, opening the package to be surprised not just with jewels, but with love. She passed through the people still shopping on Main Street, then began to hurry home, scouts' pace, running until she was panting, then walking until she breathed normally. The cold felt good on her face as she thought how excited they'd be when she returned. She was out of breath but ran up the back steps into the house. The dishwasher showed the green signal light that indicated it had finished the dishes. Nobody had bothered to do anything about it, but she forgave them, knowing they were worried about her. She ought to lay down some rules about helping her with the housework before they got over the shock of realizing she might actually leave them, but she wouldn't spoil the moment. She dropped her coat on a chair in the kitchen and hurried to the family room.

Her husband and children remained transfixed by the distant future. *The Next Generation* was fading to a list of credits. Consumed with fury, Polly sat down, clenching her teeth, grasping the arms of the chair in an attempt to dissipate her rage.

Ralph stood up, stretched. "Time for you kids to start thinking about turning in," he said. "Ready to watch the news, Pol?"

"Why not?" Speaking through frozen lips, Polly ran her fingers over the card in her pocket. ●

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Art by Allen Davis

FLUSHING SCARLETT

by Clayton Emery

Squinting in campfire smoke, Robin Hood sliced venison from the spit, grimaced at the flat flavor, turned as laughter sounded.

Will Scarlett and his son Tam Gamwell had finally returned from their sojourn into Nottingham. Robin's cousin, normally clad in dapper red, wore only a filthy gray rag twisted around his hips. His face was scratched and stubbly, one eye blacked, and he reeked of cows, horses, and pigs. Tam, his son, was similarly shabby, battered, and bug-bitten, but oddly clean. The Merry Men and Women laughed to see them, especially young Katie, who hooted at Tam mercilessly.

Will Scarlett limped up to his cousin, relinquished a dirty handful of silver pennies. Despite his dishevelment, he grinned. "Not bad, eh? I sold a horse and saddle. I had over a hundred crowns, but I threw it away."

Robin Hood jinked the coins in his hand. "Where's my salt?"

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Historical mystery buffs who've been following Clayton Emery's Robin Hood mysteries in *EQMM* will recognise the following tale as fitting at least peripherally within the series, for it features Robin's cousin Will Scarlet in a swashbuckling adventure that the author says "revives the *fabliau*, a ribald comedy in the style of Chaucer's 'The Miller's Tale.'" ¶

"*Salt!*" Scarlett slapped his forehead. "By the saints! We wuz so busy we forgot! See, Coz, it went like this . . ."

"Now remember. We're beggars. Stare at the ground, mumble, look vacant and stupid, like Much. We want to slip into town, quaff a dram, tickle a tart (me, not you), pick up news, and leave."

"And buy salt."

"I said that. Trust your da, son."

Days had been warm, and the spring road was ankle-deep in mud. The two outlaws had already pushed clear three carts sunk to the axles.

Robin Hood's cousins wore smocks so ragged they needed two, so where one failed to cover the other might, and nothing for shoes. Tam's cowlick stuck up through a woolen cap, and Scarlett could see through his straw brim. Father and son were girded with ratty purses and sacks, some for food, some for flint and tinder, some for pennies. They were plastered in mud and flecks of straw, for they'd slept in a cow byre, and smelt it.

Tam shook his walking stick to flick muck off the tip. "I wish we carried knives."

"That ain't beggarly. Besides, if we had fighting knives we'd be tempted to do something stupid with 'em, like fight. Running's our salvation. So's a good disguise, which is worth a good plan any day."

"I don't much like running."

"Maybe not, but it's how things work in the forest, and we're forest dwellers. Rabbits don't fight wolves, they run. Robin knows when to fly, so take a lesson from him. And running beats hanging, which is what we'll get if they catch us."

"Robin will hang us if we forget his salt."

Will pinched his son's ear, grinned. "Saints above, you get more like your mother every day."

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Past the woods, fields sliced like bacon stretched away on both sides. Peasants goaded skinny oxen to break first furrows, their plows rocking like ships in a storm. The outlaws skirted a flock of waddling, honking geese and approached the high gates of Nottingham. The sheriff's guards, in blue gypons painted with a silver-white hart's head, curled their lips, but Scarlett produced ha'pennies and they got past.

Inside the gates, they got their first look at the town this new year. Houses were of beams and dingy daub. Streets were narrow, overshadowed by tilting second or even third stories. After the long winter, the streets and alleys were strewn with tumbledown thatch, gray manure, and ash heaps, all being nosed and scratched by pigs and chickens. Yet despite the dismal winter-exhausted air, people were gay for a spring day. Women and elders soaked in the sun, having dragged indoor chores out of doors, or else sprucing up with pitchforks and spades. Freighters cursed yokes of oxen and horses, farmwives delivered eggs and winter turnips, children who should have been working played tag and shrieked and threw clods. Few attended a pair of beggars.

"What do we do first, Da?"

"Don't whisper, for one. Makes folks curious. We get in and out, nothing fancy, we mind our own business, we leave. But this is queer. . . ."

Scarlett's eyes flicked to an uncommon number of "lances": squads of fighting men led by a knight in full chain mail; a squire lugging sword and shield; men-at-arms in scales with swords and maces; peasants in quilted gambesons and kettle hats armed as archers or slingers or pikemen. The lances milled, called out to one another, crossed paths, but most converged on the marketplace.

"Hmmm . . . Someone's raising an army," mused Scarlett. "And not a happy one. See how they march, swinging their shoulders, jaws stuck out? They've got a burr up their backsides. Wonder why? . . ."

"Ain't we to mind our own business?" Smelling adventure, the boy wiggled like a hunting dog.

"Oh, but this *is* our business. If some baron's getting up an army, he'll set out to unseat some other baron by laying siege, killing peasants, and burning crops. Happens every spring, regular as dancing around the maypole. Robin'll want to know. . . . Besides, where there's trouble folks mind things other than their purses. Shuffle on, lad, and look humble."

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Nottingham's marketplace was jammed with stalls and corrals and carts, all mired in place, and surrounded by ale bars, where a householder simply dropped a wide plank to serve beer from his kitchen. Every bar was crammed with knights and soldiers who banged leather jacks and wooden noggins, talking loud and angry. Scarlett cast about, breathed, "Christ, I'm dry after a winter of Adam's ale. Stay close. Ears open, mouth shut."

Careful to bump no one, Scarlett squeaked a penny onto a bar. The alekeeper's wife sniffed but pushed across two noggins. Slurping ale, drifting around the crowd, the two listened. Then Tam jumped as a soldier suddenly bellowed, "There he is! Where's our bounty, Redmond?"

The outlaws watched a knight and three bodyguards grimly mount the stage at the center of the marketplace. Sir Redmond stood under a pole from which hung a lord's shield and fluttering banner; purple with a trio of martlets, a device Scarlett didn't recognize. As servant of the lord, the black-bearded knight also wore purple, but on his breast was painted his own heraldic device, a Saracen crescent. Redmond's face was burned dark as a walnut noggin, and his armor was vertical strips of steel stitched to leather, signs he was lately returned from Byzantium or the Holy Land.

The soldiers mobbed the stage, growling, waving gauntleted fists. "Where's our bounties?" "Aye, where's our wages?" "We've come this far, by the brow of the Virgin, so pay up!"

Sir Redmond let them rail awhile, then bellowed, "Good worthies! On behalf of Lord Oliver, who's summoned you here, I'm sad to say you won't *get* your bounties *or* wages, for they've been *stolen!*" The word was echoed like a curse by a hundred throats. "Aye, stolen! The men fetching it from Doncaster were *murdered* and villainously *robbed*—"

"Uh, oh," muttered Scarlett. "Time to move on, Tam. Tam? Oh, sufferin' Jesus!"

Young Tam Gamwell stood between two soldiers, big and armored and armed. Heart in his mouth, Scarlett squeaked through the crowd to hear Tam nattering, ". . . ever killed anyone with those knives? Gor! They could never stab you, eh, not with such handsome armor! Ye must be wonderful strong."

Flattered, but distracted by the news, the soldiers shooed him idly. Yet they objected as Scarlett snaked in an arm and snagged his son's ear. "Here, now! The lad weren't doing no harm—"

"Oh, it's just he loves soldiers, sir." Will affected a gurgle. "I was

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one once, before the pleurisy took me." He hacked as if his lungs would burst, and the soldiers edged away.

"Tam," the father hissed, "we must *go.*"

"Why, Da? Look what I got!" Tam rubbed his ear, held low a weapon-knife with a wire-wrapped handle.

"Hide that and belt up!" hissed his father, edging for the back of the swelling crowd, for all Nottingham had come to see the commotion. "That knight's blather is heading in only one direction!"

"—yes, *your* money was *stolen* by that rogue, that blackguard, that rascal Robin Hood and his Merry Men!"

"Uh-oh," muttered the boy.

The two were almost free of the crowd when a soldier yelled, "Hoy! Where's me knife?" And another, "My purse!"

Sir Redmond bawled on, "—But bear with me, for together we'll *take* the field, mount a campaign *against* that red-handed Robin Hood, and *root* him out of Sherwood Forest—"

"A fine place to be right now, all told," growled Scarlett. "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!"

The outlaws halted, wedged between angry fighting men and a troop of blue-clad guards pushing in. At their head was the last person Will Scarlett wanted to see. He backpedaled and stepped on both of Tam's feet. The boy yipped, heads turned.

Nicholas, the portly Sheriff of Nottingham, in a blue doublet and silver chain of office, chirped, "Hold! That's Robin Hood's cousin! The thievin' Will Scarlett!"

"Robin Hood's *what?"* roared a hundred voices behind. At the front, guards rushed with upraised hands.

Will Scarlett couldn't back up, so went forward—boldly. With a two-handed swipe he dashed ale in guards' faces, batted noses and chins with the wooden noggins, slithered through the pack like a greased eel. Guards clutching at him only tore rags. Retreating from danger, Nicholas tripped in mud and flopped on his back. Scarlett hopped full on his stomach to vault over. Since Nicholas was at the rear, outlaw and son landed in the clear.

Momentarily. For scores of angry soldiers surged from the marketplace with a roar.

Despite his limp, the outlaw sailed around a corner into an alley, rounded another, then another. His son pelted hard behind him, feet flying. "Da! We ain't stole nothin', have we?"

"Not yet! Run anyway!"

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Tam called, "I thought you said a good disguise was worth a good plan, or somethin'!"

Over his shoulder, Will panted, "Your mother used to talk at the wrong times, too, including when I was plantin' you! That must'a set the curse! Here, lad, get a boot up!"

Tam blinked. They'd ducked and weaved around pigsties and privies and clotheslines, halted in a blank-walled alley no wider than their shoulders. Tam didn't argue, took ten fingers and clambered onto the thatched roof, clung to the thick reeds. "What do I do?"

"Belt up and listen for once. Meet me in the barn behind Saint Mary's. If I'm not there by dark, slip under the wall and hie to the Greenwood. Tell Robin he was right."

The boy peeked upside down like a cat. "Right about what?"

"He'll know. God bless!"

Scarlett raced off, limping on his bad leg. The boy hunkered behind a hump in the thatch while soldiers plashed and puffed past. Then he scaled towards the peak to scout St. Mary's Church.

Halfway to the top, he plunged through the roof.

Scarlett trotted into an alley crossing, saw soldiers at both ends. He backed into a doorway to think, jiggled the door, found it barred.

"What the hell." He knocked.

After a heart-thudding moment, the door popped open. A withered crone with ten-children hips and no teeth cackled, "Come to visit your old grandmother Gretchen, have you?"

"Hunh? Oh yes. Uh, are you offering what I need?"

"I've got what any man needs, laddie. Aged meat tastes the sweetest."

Scarlett peeked. Soldiers and city guards banged on doors. He stepped inside and barred the door. "Can't think of a better way to spend the afternoon."

Gretchen peered through a shutter crack. "Those soldiers have a grudge against you, honey?"

"Me? No! But they seek a man looks just like me. Would your house have a root cellar, mayhaps?"

"Is that what you're after, to fill my cellar with your root?" She cackled as Scarlett studied the floor. "Aye, I've a root cellar. But I don't think you'll fit, what with a fat purse and all."

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Scarlett dug in his tattered clothes, pulled out one of many purses. "Hold it then for me, grandmother."

She squirreled the purse away, stepped to the back room, yanked up a trapdoor to reveal another set in the dirt under the house. Lifting that let escape a breath of rotten meat, bad cheese, dirt, and spiders. "Down there you'll be safe."

Soldiers banged on the door. "Open in the name of the sheriff!"

"Safe . . ." Will squeezed through the first hole, stepped on something squishy in the shallow root cellar. Scrooching, he just fit under the trap door, could see the entire crawlspace lit by cracks of sunlight. He reached up to pinch the strumpet's thigh. "My thanks. Mayhaps once the soldiers are gone, I can climb out of this hole and into another."

"Silly romantic!" Gretchen giggled. She dropped the trapdoor on his head. "Oops! Sorry!"

Through ringing in his skull, Scarlett heard the soldiers cease banging, heard the woman's sing-song reply.

"Romantic, yes." He scuttled out of the cellar hole into the crawlspace. "Practical too. Any trull that old knows which side the bread's buttered on. What's—oof—out—here?"

He crawled away from the alleys towards boards tacked along the house wall. His nose told him what lay on the other side. "By all the bloody Garadenes in Hell . . ."

Sighing, he punched out boards and squeezed through.

Swine squealed and stampeded as he crawled into the pigsty.

Curling into a ball to protect his eyes, Tam crashed onto a table covered with food and crockery. Planks collapsed. Tam bounced and just stopped himself from rolling into the blazing hearth.

The boy clambered up, brushed thatch and leeks and flour off his tatters. A goodwife in a crisp wimple stood where the table had been, flour to her elbows. Her mouth formed an O, but she stayed mute.

Tam's father had taught him, *When in strife, talk hard and fast. Don't give 'em time to think.*

Tam talked. "Oh, mother, how good it is to see your face! It were awful, mother, just awful!" Tam tried to think of something awful. "I was . . . in the graveyard . . . at my father's grave! Tha's it! He were a bishop, ma'am, left me dead these many long years ago. Him dead, I mean. And, er, whilst I was kneeling there, between me poor old mother and me da—no wait, he weren't a bishop

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then—any road, I'm a poor orphan, got no one, uh, uh . . . a big *eagle* came down and scooped me up! Thought I was dinner!" He grabbed a chicken off the floor, saw it was cooked, tore off a drumstick. "Like this, see?" Tam spread his arms and swooped in a circle, searching a way out. There was only the front door, barred, and a ladder to the loft. "But, uh, I prayed to the Holy Virgin to help me!" He inched towards the door. "And when I sang the kyrie, the buzzard, I mean eagle—"

"Mar—Mar—Mar—" piped the goodwife, probably trying to say "Mary."

The door suddenly leaped in the frame. "Open up! We're hunting thieves!"

"Bloody Christ!" barked Tam, and shot up the ladder, drumstick clenched in his teeth.

Leaping, Tam caught the rafters surrounding the hole he'd made, nimbly swung through. As the soldiers smashed down the door, the boy whistled to attract their attention. To upturned faces he crowed, "Be quicker next time if you want to catch Tam Gamwell!"

Laughing, he ran in great leaps down the roof, vaulted the alley, scrambled like a squirrel up the opposite peak. Still laughing, he slid down a thatched valley between roofs.

Smack into a water barrel.

Will Scarlett clambered erect from gluey filth, plocked in bare feet towards the pole fence between houses. Charging in circles, six pink-and-black pigs squealed and sprayed muck from cloven hooves. Scarlett hissed, "Hush or you're hams!" and caught a clod in the teeth.

"Stand your ground, you!"

Pounding around the corner came two men-at-arms and a leather-coated housecarl with a long-handled Saxon axe. One man pointed a cocked crossbow.

"A'right, a'right, you've caught me," Scarlett grumbled. "Just let me climb out. . . ."

He unstuck his feet, climbed atop the rail fence, balanced as if clumsy or drunk—

—then launched himself at the crossbowman.

He struck at the weapon to deflect it, dived for the housecarl's throat at the same time. The bow snapped, *punk! twang!* but the

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bolt missed. Will snagged a neckline and the two tumbled, the outlaw on top.

Scarlett levered up from the housecarl's chest, rocked backwards. A swordsman slapped with the flat of his sword to brain Will, missed, and whapped the housecarl instead. Scarlett snatched off the housecarl's helmet and slung it at the swordsman's face. The man howled at a chipped tooth.

Smug, grinning, Scarlett scrambled up, stomping on the housecarl's throat for good measure, then shoved the howling swordsman backwards with a laugh.

Then he recalled. "Where's the third—"

A helmeted head slammed Will square in the breadbasket.

Bulled backwards by the running soldier, Scarlett hit the fence, which crumpled. Pigs bolted for freedom. Stumbling in filth, Will kept his feet by hauling on the man's kettle hat, for the chin strap was fastened. Tripping over poles, yanked by his chin strap, the soldier flopped facedown in the pigsty. Wheezing, Will collapsed knees-down on the man's back.

The bruised soldier and housecarl were up again. With no place to go, Scarlett scooped muck and flung it at them. "Nyah, nyah! Come and get me!"

The soldier stopped in shock, thinking he'd roused a madman. But the housecarl pointed his axe, bawled, "Load that crossbow! Put a bolt through his lights—"

Scarlett hurled muck hard and fast, looked for a way out, found only daub walls. The housecarl yelled again—

—then collapsed as something crashed alongside his head.

Saggy, gap-mouthed Gretchen held the handle of a redware chamberpot. The housecarl, crockery crumbs in his hair, lay sprawled.

The remaining soldier yanked back his crossbow string, raised, aimed—

—and yelled as something tangled his legs.

Tam, bedraggled and streaming wet, belabored the soldier with a stolen broom. Whooping, Scarlett vaulted bodies, got whapped in the head, but shredded the soldier's gypon to rags and hurriedly bound the dazed man.

"My thanks, grandmother," panted Will. "I owe you another purse. Or his. But why change sides?"

"Oh, I'm flexible." Gretchen tossed the handle into the sty. "And any road, I've seen this lout before. He's rough on women."

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Scarlett turned to his son and laughed. "Tam! You're soaking wet!"

"Da!" the boy crowed. "You're covered with pig muck!"

Scarlett grinned, spat something off his tongue. "You get more like your mother all the time. Here, help me bundle up these soldiers. We need two of 'em, and this bloke's trappings."

Tam grabbed a foot and pulled. "What for?"

"Now that I've had a moment to think, I've thunk."

Tam's hat brim ran water into his eyes. "Robin says that's always trouble."

"He heard it from your mother. And it's no trouble. Look you, if that knight is looking for us, we've got to find him first."

"Hunh?"

"Just grab that boot, will ya?. . ."

Black-bearded Sir Redmond directed the search from horseback, spurring from alley to street to bridge so fast his footguard of three panted to keep up.

Now a sergeant with a tall axe came running, holding his bobbling kettle hat. "Sir Knight! A word! We've trapped the blackguards!"

"Eh?" Redmond reined in hard, his horse whinnying as the bit cut his tongue. "Where, man? Hoy, wait up!"

The sergeant waved frantically and trotted down an alley. Redmond booted his horse, but the alley twisted and narrowed until his toes scraped the walls. His three bodyguards had to walk single file behind, hands on sword pommels.

At a widening in the alley, the sergeant signaled, "Dismount, if you will, good sir. They're in that barn."

They crept towards a small barn jammed between two houses, obviously an afterthought, for doors on both sides stood open as a public right of way.

Inside, the sergeant put a finger to his lips, crossed the barn, pulled the opposite doors shut, barred them. The stalls were empty, the animals slaughtered in late winter. Left was moldy straw, wooden rakes and forks, a block and tackle for hoisting bales to the low loft. Their feet scuffed crumbled straw and made dust motes dance. The knight gaped around. "Where are the thieves?"

"Close, sir. Your plan's working," said the sergeant. Gently he shooed the confused bodyguards back out the door. One balked, refusing to leave his superior. To the other two the sergeant cooed,

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"Make ready to grab 'em when they come down the alley." As they turned to look, he gently barred the door behind their backs, shutting in dimness lit only by slits high above.

"God's fish and loaves!" rasped Redmond. His bodyguard looked confused. "What—"

Will Scarlett doffed his helmet, raised his hands. "You've caught me, sir. Pardon the deception, but I was afraid the mob might tear me apart for stealing their payroll."

"What? Oh yes, of course . . ." Thunderstruck, but thinking fast, Sir Redmond whipped out his sword. "I know not your game, cousin of Robin Hood, but you're caught and you'll hang!"

Hands high, Scarlett nodded dolefully. But instead of cringing, he advanced against Redmond's sword, pressing his leather-and-iron breast against the point so the knight backed steadily. The outlaw jabbered, "Hanging! Oh, Saint Hildegard, watch over me! A ghastly fate, but a deserved one! You're too clever by far! But I pray . . . you'll spare . . . my son—TAM!"

With a squeal of blocks, the boy leapt out of the loft. A noose laid on the barn floor, under straw, unfurled like a cobra and closed around Redmond's legs, staggering him.

Will snatched a wooden pitchfork from a corner and slammed it alongside the bodyguard's head below his helm. The man dropped.

Dangling halfway to the floor, Tam grunted as his arms creaked in their sockets. Weighing far less than the knight, he failed to hoist him, so jerked like a pickerel on a hook. Tipsy, the knight bawled, shoved the noose down to his ankles, sawed awkwardly at the rope with his sword. Frantically Tam jigged, kicked at a beam, swore with his father's choicest oaths.

With the pitchfork, Scarlett knocked Redmond's sword flying. Then he bounded into the air, grabbed his son around the middle. With a bawl the knight was hoicked high, feet first, like a pig for slaughter.

Until Tam bleated, "Da! You're heavy!" and let go. Father and son crashed into dusty straw and a fit of sneezing. The knight's mailed back slammed the floor. Desperately he fished for a knife flopping at his belt.

Sneezing, spluttering, Scarlett scrambled up, jumped, caught the rope. With Tam holding his waist, they hauled the knight high to spin in the air, lashed the rope to a post.

Bodyguards banged on the barn doors. One slipped his sword

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between to lift the bar. Scarlett scampered, wedged the fork behind the bar to lock the doors.

"There! That was easy!" Will panted. "Now, friend, pray, let us talk."

Gently, the outlaw grabbed the knight's belt and walked him in a circle. Inverted, red-faced, and gasping, Redmond tried to swear.

Scarlett tut-tutted. "Save your breath, you thief-calling thief, you. I'll admit being a thief, as will Robin Hood and all his Merry Men and Women. *But* we didn't steal your bounties. I should know, after all: Our band ain't murdered no one all spring.

"So *you're* lying. And if you're lying, you're hiding something. And what could you hide except that *you* stole the money. Maybe you murdered the couriers, maybe you bribed them, but you got it. You're fresh out of Byzantium, yet you failed to make your fortune, eh? Else why would you take service in a baron's household?

"So *now* you'd mount an expedition into Sherwood to keep everyone busy. And while this army flounders in the brush, you'd quietly disappear. Truth or falsehood, false hood?"

The knight's reply was long, profane, uninformative.

Scarlett tsked. He'd been winding the man round and round all this time. Now he let go with a sharp spin.

Upside down, whirling, his skull ready to burst, the knight could only gasp. Scarlett thumped him so he swung to and fro besides.

"That looks like fun, Da," piped Tam.

"If you've no brains to drown, maybe. I wonder if his head will eventually burst, like a bladder in a football game." He caught the knight's arm, halted his spinning. Purple-faced, the knight drooled. "Come, brother, confession eases the soul. You stole the bounties. Say it—just to please me—and we're quits."

"All right, all right," gargled the man. He flailed his arms but could barely lift them. "But I'll see you hanged, you—"

Scarlett left him hanging, walked to a shadowed stall, tipped aside bales of straw. Underneath, speckled like newborn chicks, huddled the two soldiers Scarlett had thrashed earlier, gagged and resentful but alert. Deftly, Scarlett drew his thin throatcutter from a sleeve to slice their gags. "You heard?"

One man spat. "Aye, we heard! The skiving skinflint! Some reckoned he was dishonest! He'd starve his own mother and sell her bones for kindling!"

"So Robin Hood and his Merry Madmen didn't steal your pay, but this trustee did? Are we clear?"

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Glumly, the men nodded. They reserved their anger for Redmond.

Scarlett nodded. "Then we're finished, Tam. Let's be off."

"Off?" The boy cast about. One soldier, locked out, had run around the block to bang on the other door. More soldiers joined them with loud harangues. There were no windows, only sparrow-slits under the eaves. "How are we to escape?"

"Faith, lad. Have respect for your ancestors—meself included. Remember what Allan-a-Dale tells us of Archimedes?"

"He took baths?"

Scarlett addressed the swaying, barely conscious knight. "Where did you stash the money, pray? As one thief to another, I'm just curious."

"Never—you can—won't—"

Scarlett tsked. With a tail of rope, he fashioned a slipknot and draped it over the knight's head. The man's red eyes grew wide. Scarlett wrapped the hank around a post, then walked the opposite way, tugging the knight at a steep angle. As the rope tightened by inches the man's face turned black.

"New thoughts, good sir? Or shall I lash the bight to the door and then drop the bar? Brawny men, rampaging mad, will probably rip the doors off the hinges—"

"Mag—gie. Harlot. In Ironmonger's Lane. Hold—ing." He had no breath left.

Leaning against the rope, Scarlett crabbed to the doors, still jammed by the manure fork. "Stand at that side, Tam, and open 'em when I nod. Help! They're killing Sir Redmond! Mercy!"

At a nod, the bar dropped and the doors whisked open. Four soldiers charged in, swords outthrust. Squinting in the dimness, they tried to fathom the strange scene. Scarlett cleared his throat and a man whirled. "Stand fast, you—"

Scarlett flipped both hands in the air. "I surrender!"

The rope whizzed around the post. Released, the half-suffocated Redmond swung towards his soldiers like some weird war engine. Howling, the soldiers ducked.

Scarlett grabbed the manure fork, rammed a man in the belly to bowl him into others, dashed past. Tam squirted by.

The two pelted down the alley, Scarlett still clutching the manure fork. Tam huffed, "Where're we—bound—now?"

"To see—a harlot named—Maggie!"

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Naked, a soldier straddled a harlot named Maggie in a squalid room with a low ceiling and walls of water-stained daub.

The door rattled and a boy stumbled into the room, peering in the gloom.

The soldier jumped clean off the bed. The jezebel finger-combed her hair.

"Oh, forgive me, sir!" Tam goggled at the nude woman. "I were looking for my mother!"

"Well, she isn't here, for pity's sake!" The soldier's long body was riddled with scars edged in dirt. Surprise turned to anger. "You young whelp! I'll—"

He swatted at Tam's head, but the boy ducked neatly as a market cur. While the soldier cursed and flailed, Will Scarlett lunged through the door with a manure fork.

Deftly, the outlaw bracketed the soldier's throat with twin wooden tines, shoved him across the room by his Adam's apple. When the soldier's head hit the wall, Scarlett slammed the fork so the tines bit the daub and held. Gagging, the soldier clutched at the wooden haft. Scarlett ordered Tam to lean on the fork. Dubiously, the boy pressed.

"Sorry to trouble you," the outlaw smiled. "Won't be a moment."

He whirled on the harlot, who scrabbled under the mattress for a knife. Scarlett boosted her rump, dumped her on the bed. "Be easy, dear. This is business. Where's the money Redmond the Blackbeard gave you to hold?"

A shake of the head. "I don't know what—"

Ancient Gretchen creaked into the doorway. "Maggie, help the gentleman out. He's a friend of the poor."

"Oh." Bright as a squirrel, the woman hopped off the bed, bouncing in all directions. Tam's eyes bugged so he almost dropped the quivering pitchfork. Maggie plucked up a floorboard and drew out an oilskin pouch big as a pig's bladder.

Scarlett tugged the laces and tipped the pouch into his hand. Silver pennies by the dozens spilled out. The outlaw gave a handful to Gretchen, another handful to Maggie, then tugged the strings. "The rest for the poor."

"That's me," said Gretchen. She snatched the sack and drew another handful. "For my old age."

Scarlett took the sack with a grin. "You know, I like this. They accuse us of stealing the payroll so, as penance, we do. Even a

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bishop would bless us. Maggie, do you need bruises to prove this was beaten out of you?"

She shrugged, jiggling. "I got bruises."

"Da-a-a-a!"

With a roar, the naked soldier ripped free of the wall. Menacing as a skinned bear, he threw the fork and Tam aside, lunged for the outlaw. Scarlett jerked Maggie into his path. The soldier grappled to hurl her aside, and Scarlett clouted him with the oilskin pouch. The sack split and silver sparkled around the room. The soldier collapsed on the bed. Scarlett swore. "Drat!"

"Didn't you hit him kind of hard, Da?"

"Serves him right." All and sundry picked up coins. "He's supposed to be scouring the streets for us, ain't he?"

Gretchen wheezed, "How will you escape Nottingham? The sheriff's men will search house to house, and Redmond's men roam the streets."

Scarlett knotted the rent pouch and stuffed it down his shirt. "Hmm. Can't go as a soldier. Hate to use a trick twice. And Tam's too tiny . . ." He stooped to the floor, picked up Maggie's lousy gown. "But where there's a Will (Scarlett), there's a way."

Tam's eyes grew round. "Oh, no, Da! Not that! Please!"

A short time later, a tall woman and short girl limped and stumped down a muddy trashy street. They carried baskets, as if bound to glean turnips from the fields.

"You won't tell Katie, will you, Da?" Katie was Tam's archnemesis in the Greenwood.

The outlaw pulled his feet high from the mud, tried to wiggle like a woman. "Well, now . . ."

"Oh, Da, you wouldn't!"

"Shh, keep your voice down. No, we can skip this part." He pulled his bonnet straight, batted at his skirts. "How do women walk about in these, anyway? They flip up a lot easier than they hang down. No, poor Katie's too delicate, I'm afraid. She'd laugh herself into apoplexy. And talk her tongue loose telling the world. And get no sleep for heckling you. No, her health'd never stand it. Now, Polly, Tom's girl, she's sensible. We might tell her . . ."

"Da!"

"Oh, all right. We'll tell 'em we stole swords and cut through half a hundred men. They won't believe that either, but it's a better story. Still, I can't help thinking we're forgetting somethin'."

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"You forgot to get Robin's—Oops!"

They'd come within sight of the gate, found it crammed with the sheriff's blue guards and milling soldiers. The gates were open, though, as peasants sought a dram after a thirsty day. "What now, Da?"

"Try calling me Ma, for a start. Hmm . . . We could wander till dark, but they're even guarding the hidey-hole under St. Mary's. No, we need something—"

From behind came the rhythmic jingle of horse harness, and they instinctively trudged aside. Scarlett cooed, "Ah, Saint Dismas blesses us today. Now pay attention, son. . . ."

Blackbearded Redmond was disheveled, red-faced, blind with fury. Spurring hard, he thudded past them to the gate, yelled obscenely at the soldiers to stay alert, and wheeled his horse, causing it to stumble in the mud. As the knight cantered back up the road, a wife and daughter intercepted him. "Here, now, what's this? Get away, you slut!"

The tall woman clutched his stirrup to gain his attention, warbled, "Oh, sir, I *seen* him! That thievin' *rogue,* Will Scarlett, a pox on his name! He's hidin' in a barn nearby, sir! He tried to *feel* me, sack me *womanhood!"*

"Bloody hell, get *away!"*

In a man's voice, Scarlett said, "See, son? Liars never believe anyone."

The knight's eyes bugged. He opened his mouth to yell.

Scarlett plucked a cudgel from his basket and walloped him on the knee.

Redmond howled and jerked his leg back. Will caught his boot with two hands and heaved. Redmond almost broke his neck crashing in the mud. All up and down the street, people yelled.

"Hie, Tam, let's be off!" Skirts flapping, Scarlett belly-flopped across the high Norman saddle, swung around, and kicked for the stirrups. He scooped up his son in one brawny arm, slammed him across the pommel like a gutted deer as soldiers came plodding.

Will wheeled the horse and laid about with the cudgel. He clopped a soldier on the hand, smacked the horse between the ears, clipped Tam's heel, dinged a helmet. Finally the horse faced the gates, and Will dug in his heels with a *"Hyah!"*

A flash of brown, they flew through the gates. Peasants scattered before the mad horseman, gawked when they saw an ill-dressed woman and scrawny daughter slung like a sack of grain.

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With a maniacal yell and laugh, Will tossed his bonnet to the wind. Unclear what transpired, the peasants cheered nonetheless.

Their cheers died as a trio of cavalry pounded out the gate after the felons.

Will glanced behind, saw they were gaining. Lurching, drumming, steering desperately for drier spots, Scarlett hollered, "You'd think a false knight would keep a fast horse!"

"Da-a-a-a-a!!!" Tam had slipped so low his bonnet trailed in the road, his hands gripped the cinch strap, his skirts drooped around his ears. A round and pink bum smiled up at Heaven.

Will clutched a skinny ankle with one hand, wrenched the reins with the other. "Just like your mother! Hiking her skirts wrong place wrong time! Hang on, I've got a plan!"

"Th-is w-a-s a pl-a-a-a-an!"

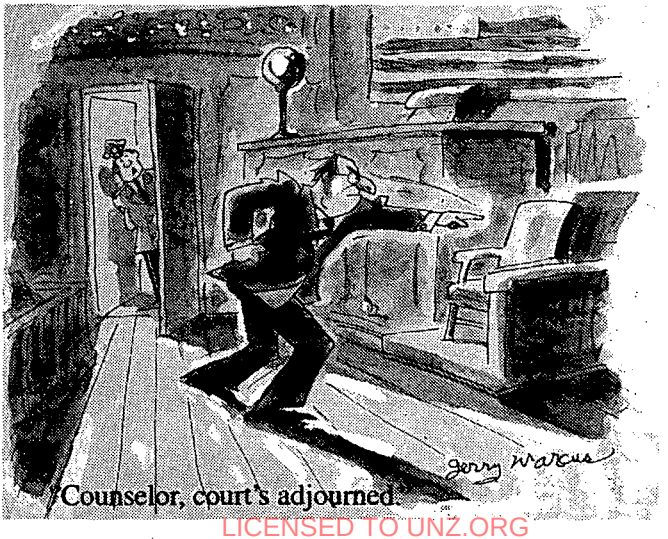
The horsemen drew abreast, grinning at the chase. They yelled at Scarlett to rein in.

Will laughed. Stuffing reins in his teeth, he fished in his shirt, drew out the torn pouch. He whipped it high and silver sparkled in the sun. "Be sure and share it!"

The next time Will glanced behind, the riders had scrambled off their mounts to pick coins out of the mud. One waved at the fleeing felons.

"There you go, son!" laughed Robin's cousin. He smacked the boy on the rump. *"That* makes an *end!"*

And they disappeared under the trees. ●



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The Case of The Headless Man

by Bill Crider

1.

Outside Bo Wagner's study, lightning ripped a white-gold line through the inky sky and thunder rattled the windows. Rain hissed on the roof and washed across the window panes.

Bo hardly noticed. All he heard was the clattering of the typewriter keys as he converted Janice Langtry's flowing script into black pica type on the white bond paper:

> Sam Fernando leaned languidly against the door frame and smiled. "So you believe that Scott Malone's death is a simple case of suicide, Detective Lomax?"
>
> The burly policeman shrugged. "Sure it is. Open and shut."
>
> Fernando raised his right eyebrow. "Then how do you explain this?" he asked, pointing to an innocuous-looking champagne cork that lay on the floor near the chair where Tipper Morgan had died.

Bo stopped typing and pulled a pack of Camels and a matchbook from his shirt pocket. He lit up and exhaled with pleasure. He was glad Janice wasn't there. She always complained about his smoking.

On the other hand, he didn't really mind the complaining, not as long as he could look at Janice, who was tall and blond and built like a brick bathhouse. Look was all he could ever do, however. If he tried anything else, she'd give him a trip to the moon, the kind Ralph Kramden always threatened Alice with. It was too bad that she was bigger than he was.

Thunder crashed again with the sound of someone falling down a distant attic stairway, but Bo didn't hear it. He was reading what he had just typed. He hated it when Sam Fernando, the Gentleman Sleuth, did that bit with his eyebrow. If Bo had been doing

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the writing, he'd have Lomax rip the eyebrow off and stuff it down Fernando's throat, maybe knocking out a couple of pearly teeth in the process.

But Bo wasn't the writer. That was Janice's job. Bo did the plotting and the typing, Janice did the writing. That was the agreement, and he supposed it was basically a good one, considering the fact that he couldn't spell any word of more than four letters without spending hours at the dictionary. He couldn't construct a decent sentence, either; he didn't know a split infinitive from a dangling modifier, and frankly he didn't care. He knew how to murder people with sewing needles, with belt buckles, and even with champagne corks, as Sam Fernando was just about to prove.

Sam Fernando. Bo ground out his cigarette in the overflowing ashtray by the typewriter. Fernando was a sissy. If Bo had his way, Lomax would be the hero, Lomax or someone like him—someone big, tough, and mean. Someone like Mike Hammer, who was featured in books that were currently outselling the Fernando books about ten to one.

Janice didn't care about that. "I like refined men," she often told Bo, looking with distaste at a stain on his shirt or pants. "So that's the kind of man I'm going to write about. Besides, our books are selling very well, thank you."

Well, that last part was true. Sales certainly weren't anywhere near bad, but Bo would still have liked to write about a *real* man now and then. He brushed ashes off his wrinkled shirt and looked back at the manuscript:

> "You see, Detective Lomax, to the untrained eye such as yours that cork appears to be perfectly normal, but I can see that it is not. If you will simply bend down and look more closely . . ."

Bo might have tried to slip in something funny here, maybe like having Lomax grab the cork and poke the supercilious Fernando in the eye with it, but Janice would never let him get away with it. Besides, he'd promised her he wouldn't change anything. That was the only reason she'd allowed him to finish the typing without her looking over his shoulder as she usually did. She had a cold and didn't feel like supervising him, so he'd made his promise and sent her home.

The telephone rang just as thunder shook the house again. Bo forgot about the manuscript, mashed out his cigarette in the ash-

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tray, and picked up the phone. The caller was Janice.

"How's the typin' goin'?" she asked in the soft Texas drawl that drove Bo wild with unrequited desire even when it was obvious that the speaker had a stuffy nose.

"Great," he said. "The Gentleman Sleuth is about to explain to Lomax about the champagne cork. How's the cold?"

"Better. I had some chicken soup. Do you think you could take a break?"

"Sure. Why?"

"I was hopin' you could come by and pick me up."

Adrenaline shot through Bo's body so fast that it practically squirted out his fingertips. This was the call he'd been waiting for all his life. Janice with a cold was worth any three other women at the peak of health.

"Five minutes! I'll be there in five minutes! Wait! Four! I'll be there in *four* minutes!"

"Down, boy, down," Janice said. "If you don't stop pantin' like that, you're liable to step on your tongue."

Bo forced himself to take a deep breath and let it out slowly. It wasn't easy; he'd never had a call from Janice like this one before. In fact, he couldn't remember her ever having called about anything but business. A sudden dark suspicion popped into his head.

"Why did you phone me, anyway?" he asked.

"There's been a murder," she said.

Bo felt the adrenaline again, but different this time. "What does that have to do with us?"

"Lieutenant Franklin thinks we might be able to help out."

Franklin was their police contact. Whenever Bo wanted to check on police procedure, he called Franklin, who was usually glad to help. To return the favor, Bo and Janice had helped him solve one of his recent cases.

"Another locked room?" Bo asked.

"I don't know about that, but there's sure somethin' strange goin' on."

"How do you mean?"

"There's a witness. She saw a man runnin' away from the scene of the crime."

Bo was disappointed. "There's nothing strange about there being a witness."

"Maybe not," Janice said. "But there was somethin' strange about the man who was runnin'."

"Oh," Bo said. "And what was that?"

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Janice sneezed.

Bo said, "Gesundheit."

"Thanks."

"Don't mention it. What was strange about the man who was running?"

"He didn't have a head," Janice said.

2.

Bo Wagner was thirty-five years old, but, as Janice often reminded him, he had never grown up. Which was why they were zipping through the streets in a black chopped and channeled '49 Merc' and why Bo was wearing a red jacket just like the one James Dean had worn in *Rebel Without a Cause*. Ray Charles was belting out "What'd I Say" from a rear-seat speaker that crackled every time there was a lightning flash. The windshield wipers tried to keep time with Ray and the Raylettes, but they were a little off.

"You look great," Bo told Janice, cutting his eyes to the side.

"I do not. My nose is red and my eyes are puffy. And you watch where you're goin'," she added as Bo swerved to miss a car that had started to pull out of a side street.

Bo honked the Merc's horn and resisted the urge to give the driver the high sign. He knew Janice wouldn't approve.

"Tell me again about this headless guy," he said.

"You know as much as I do. All the lieutenant told me was that somebody saw a man without a head runnin' away from the house where a woman was murdered."

"How was she murdered?" Bo asked.

Janice took a tissue from her purse and sneezed into it. Then she said, "She was stabbed with a letter opener."

"Crime of passion," Bo said. "The killer grabbed up the nearest handy weapon. Probably he was somebody who knew her."

"It might have been an intruder," Janice said.

The Chipmunks came on the radio, singing "Ragtime Cowboy Joe." Bo twisted the knob and turned the radio off. Something like "The Witch Doctor" was okay as a novelty song, but he drew the line at a bunch of singing chipmunks.

"Intruders usually carry their own weapons with them," he said. "You wait and see. It'll be someone who knew her."

"He ought to be easy to find, then," Janice said. "Him not havin' a head and all."

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Bo looked at the rain falling through the headlight beams. "It won't be as easy as you think," he said.

The house where the murder had been committed was in an older section of the city, a long way from the residential area where Janice lived. The street was narrow and dark. The homes all dated from before the war and were solidly built of brick and wood. Most of them had concrete porches. It was easy to spot the one where the murder had occurred. The porch light was on, and police cars lined the curb in front.

Bo had to park nearly a block away. "I see you brought your umbrella," he said.

"Of course. Didn't you?"

Bo thought umbrellas were for sissies. Mike Hammer never used one. Of course, Hammer wore a hat and a trench coat, while all Bo had was his little red jacket.

"I don't need an umbrella," Bo said. "The rain's letting up."

They sat for a moment and listened to the rain pounding on the car's roof.

"Sure it is," Janice said. "A good thing, too, since this umbrella's too small for both of us."

She opened the door on the passenger side and stepped out, opening the umbrella overhead as she did so. Bo sat for a second and watched her walk toward the house. He liked the way her blond ponytail wiggled. It made him think of a new song he liked, something by the Playmates about five feet of heaven in a ponytail. Of course, Janice was more like six feet of heaven, but as far as he was concerned that just made things better.

After two seconds of wishful thinking, Bo tore his eyes off the ponytail and got out of the car. He pulled his jacket over his head and sprinted past Janice. He was on the porch brushing water off his sleeves when she arrived. She folded her umbrella and shook it, getting water on Bo.

"Hey," he said. "Watch what you're doing."

"Sorry," Janice said as if her mind was elsewhere. "I was thinkin'."

Bo was about to make a smart remark about that when a uniform cop stuck his head out the door and said, "Who're you?"

"Bo Wagner and Janice Langtry," Bo told him. "Lieutenant Franklin asked us to come."

The cop gave them the once-over, clearly approving more of Janice than of Bo. Then he disappeared into the house and came

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back with Franklin, who held the screen door open and said, "C'mon in."

He sounded as if he had a worse cold than Janice, but Bo knew that he didn't. Franklin's voice always sounded like that.

The lieutenant led the writers into the back room of the house. The room looked to Bo like a sleeping porch that had been remodeled into a sort of narrow den. There was a Sylvania TV set on one wall with a couch opposite it. A telephone lay on the floor, along with a *TV Guide* and a *National Geographic* that had apparently fallen off a toppled end table near one arm of the couch.

A dark-haired woman lay on a throw rug between the TV set and the couch. Her face was turned to the side, and Bo could see that she was young, maybe about thirty. The throw rug was stained with her blood, and a gold letter opener protruded from between the woman's shoulder blades.

Bo felt something lurch in his stomach. Looking at a real murder scene was a lot different from writing about a fictional one. Janice touched his arm, and he immediately tightened his stomach and squared his shoulders. He wouldn't want her to think he couldn't take it.

"Betty Martin," Franklin was saying. "Married, twenty-nine years old. Husband was away on a business trip, came back and found her like this."

"How long ago?" Bo asked. He could see fingerprint powder on everything, and he knew the evidence gathering was already complete.

Franklin looked at his watch. "About two and a half hours. I called you two because you helped me once before, and this one's pretty peculiar."

"The man with no head?" Janice said.

Franklin nodded. "Yeah. Woman across the street was looking out her window and saw somebody running away from this house just about the time the murder must have happened. She said he didn't have a head."

"Any other witnesses to confirm that?" Bo asked, as if he actually believed it.

Franklin gave him a look, then said, "Not a one. It was raining pretty hard, and there was nobody on the streets. Not that we've been able to find, anyway. And none of the other neighbors saw a thing."

"So this woman across the street called the police to report that Ichabod Crane was running amok?" Bo asked.

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"Ichabod Crane had a head," Janice reminded him. "It was Brom Bones who pretended to be headless."

Bo tried to raise an eyebrow the way Sam Fernando would have done. He failed.

"If you say so," he told Janice. "But am I right about the call?"

"No," Franklin said. "You're wrong. It was the victim who made the call."

3.

The way Franklin explained it, Betty Martin hadn't actually called the police. She'd called her next-door neighbor, one James Fischer, to tell him that there was someone in her house.

Janice gave Bo a look. "An intruder."

"That's what Mrs. Martin said," Franklin told them. "Fischer was a friend, and she asked him to come right over because someone was in the house. Fischer came over, all right, but he called the station first. By the time he got here, the husband had arrived and was standing over the body. We got here not long after that."

"The husband was standing over the body, huh?" Bo said. "And how long had he been home?"

Franklin rubbed his potato-shaped nose. "The husband's name is Gary, and he says he hadn't been here long. He says he would have called us himself if Fischer hadn't already done it. He drove in from San Antonio. He sells sporting goods, and he'd been on the road for two weeks."

"And he's the primary suspect, right?" Bo said. "Crime of passion. Husband comes home, finds wife with lover, kills her, and lover gets away. Open and shut. Just look for a guy with no head; he should be pretty easy to pick out of a lineup."

Franklin snorted. He said, "What about your intruder theory? There've been two or three burglaries in this neighborhood the past few weeks. I've talked to the patrolman for the area, and he thinks he knows who's behind them—a teenager named Tony Banks. They'll be bringing him in."

"I get it," Bo said. "An intruder who didn't bring his own weapon. Probably just out for kicks, breaks in, gets surprised by the homeowner, and bingo!—he stabs her with the letter opener. If Banks doesn't have a head, you're in like Flynn. Case closed."

Franklin didn't appear to enjoy the idea of the headless man as much as Bo did. "I wish it were that easy."

Bo looked around the room. "So what's the problem? No clues?"

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"Not a one so far," Franklin said. "And don't start about the guy with no head again. I've about had it with the guy with no head."

"What about fingerprints?" Janice asked.

"There are plenty of those," Franklin said. "Probably most of them belong to the murdered woman and her husband. But the killer wiped the handle of the letter opener and the telephone."

"Would a teenage intruder think about wiping prints?" Bo asked.

"Everybody knows about stuff like that these days," Franklin said. "TV."

"Could we talk to the neighbor?" Janice asked.

Franklin nodded. "She's right across the street. Name's Frances Teague."

"You're kidding," Bo said. "Frances Teague? That'd make her Fran Teague. Get it? Say it real fast. Franteague. Frantic. Great character name. We might be able to use that."

Franklin wasn't impressed. "This isn't some story with funny character names we're talking about here, Wagner. This is serious stuff."

"Sorry," Bo said.

"He's not really sorry," Janice said, glowering at him. "But he will be if he doesn't watch it."

Bo didn't like to have Janice angry with him. "I'll watch it."

"Let's go then," Janice said.

Mrs. Teague's house wasn't much different from the Martins'. The curtains were lacier, the floor was carpeted, and the furniture was older. That was about it.

They were standing in the front bedroom, Janice holding the thin curtain aside and looking out the window. Mrs. Teague was beside her, with Bo standing behind them.

"Was the Martins' porch light on when you looked out?" Janice asked.

"Oh no," Mrs. Teague said. She was short and thin, with gray hair that lay close to her head in tight curls. "There was just that streetlight up the block."

Bo couldn't see the streetlight from where he stood, and it didn't give much illumination in the rain and darkness, nothing more than faint streaks of light that thinned and faded into the shadows.

"Where did the man go?" Janice asked, straightening up. She was much taller than Mrs. Teague, who looked almost like a wizened child beside her.

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"I couldn't tell," Mrs. Teague said. "It was so dark that I wouldn't have seen him at all if there hadn't been a lightning flash. It was quite a surprise when I saw that his head was missing, let me tell you."

Bo believed the last part, but he didn't think a lightning flash would have improved visibility very much.

"Did he turn to the right or to the left?" Janice asked. "Could you tell?"

"Yes. When I saw him he stepped off the porch and turned to the right. To *my* right, that is. It would have been his left, of course. And that was all I saw, really. After the flash it was dark again."

"Was he a big man or a small man?" Bo asked.

"Just average. About your size."

Bo wasn't sure just how to take that. While he was thinking about it, Janice asked, "Why were you looking out the window? Did you hear something?"

"I was looking for Prissy," Mrs. Teague said. "I couldn't find her, and sometimes she sits in the window."

"Who's Prissy?" Bo asked.

"She's a cat," Mrs. Teague informed him. "I have three cats. Prissy, Missy, and Sissy."

Bo opened his mouth to say something, but a look from Janice shut him up.

"Sissy and Missy are afraid of storms," Mrs. Teague went on, "but not Prissy. She likes to sit in the window and watch the rain. She wasn't there, though. I found her later in the kitchen, eating."

"Is that where she is now?" Bo asked.

"Oh no. She and the other girls are in the back room. They all have beds there."

"Of course," Bo said.

"How well did you know the Martins and Mr. Fischer?" Janice asked, getting things back on track.

Mrs. Teague looked down at the floor. "Oh, they were very nice neighbors."

Bo knew an evasion when he heard it. "Did the Martins ever argue?"

Mrs. Teague looked embarrassed. "Well, sometimes. I could hear them yelling."

Bo was sure that Franklin had already asked these same questions, but he said, "What about fighting? Did they ever fight?"

"Oh no. Just loud arguments sometimes. Everyone argues."

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"What did they argue about?" Janice asked.

Mrs. Teague drew herself up to her full height, which Bo estimated at about five foot zero. "I'm sure I wouldn't know."

"What about Fischer?" Bo asked. "Is he married?"

Mrs. Teague frowned. "No. He's a *bachelor.*" She used the same tone she might have used in informing them that Fischer was a white slaver.

"Nothing wrong with bachelors," Bo said defensively.

Both Janice and Mrs. Teague looked at him. An uncomfortable silence gathered in the room.

"Did he ever, ah, visit Mrs. Martin?" Bo asked.

"I'm sure I wouldn't know about that," Mrs. Teague said in a tone that led Bo to believe that she knew very well but that she wasn't about to tell. He had a feeling that she looked out her front window a lot more often than she was letting on, and that she wasn't looking for Prissy all the time, either.

"Well, I guess that about does it, then," Bo said. "Thanks for all your help, Mrs. Teague."

Janice added her own thanks, and the two of them left. When they were outside, Bo shivered. "Three cats," he said. "Can you imagine it?"

"I like cats," Janice said.

"Hey, me too," Bo said, a little too quickly. "I was just thinking how nice it would be to have three of them, that's all."

"I bet you were," Janice said, and sneezed.

4.

When they got back to the Martins', Franklin was in the living room talking quietly to a boy dressed in faded jeans and a light jacket a lot like the one Bo was wearing. *Probably Tony Banks,* Bo thought. *Too bad he has a head.* The boy looked very young, not more than fifteen. His dark hair was combed into an admirable ducktail.

Franklin saw Bo and Janice come into the room and motioned for them to join him. He introduced them to Tony, who looked at them shyly with dark brown eyes that didn't stay still for very long. He seemed too frail to have plunged a letter opener into anyone's back.

"Tony tells me that he's been a naughty boy," Franklin said.

The boy twisted his hands together nervously. He didn't look much like a burglar to Bo.

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"He's broken into a couple of houses around here," Franklin said. "But he says he's never hurt anybody."

"That's right," Tony said, his voice as soft as his shifty eyes. "I just take things sometimes. That's all."

Bo was about to ask him what he took when a man burst into the room, with a cop right behind him.

"Is this the kid that killed her?" the man yelled, reaching out for Tony, who ducked behind Franklin. "Let me have him for five minutes! Just five!"

Franklin put a hand on the man's chest. "Hold on, Mr. Martin. We don't know that Tony did anything."

Franklin wouldn't have been able to stop Martin if he were really angry, Bo thought, because Martin was really huge. It was a good thing the other cop came up behind Martin, ready to put the arm on him if necessary. Not that Bo wouldn't have jumped right in if needed, but fortunately he wasn't.

"The little juvenile delinquent killed my wife," Martin said, reaching around Franklin for the boy. "I heard you talking. I know he was here."

Tony didn't seem afraid of Martin in the least, just a little nervous. "I was here, but I didn't come in. Like I told the lieutenant, I just checked the back door, and it was locked. I never break in anywhere, just go in if the door's open."

"Is that right, Lieutenant?" Janice asked. "About the door bein' locked?"

"That's right," Franklin said. "Bolted from the inside."

"So nobody went out that way."

"Not after Mrs. Martin died," Franklin said.

"Which leaves us with the headless man," Bo said.

"That's right," Franklin agreed. He didn't look happy about it. "And now if Mr. Martin will just go back in the other room, we'll finish talking to Tony."

"What about Fischer?" Janice asked. "Is he here?"

Franklin inclined his head in the direction Martin was going, led by the other cop, who had a firm grip on his arm. "He's in there. He's pretty shook up over this."

"That Mr. Martin's pretty shook up, too," Bo said. "And he's a big guy. Big enough to stick that letter opener right through his wife if he wanted to. He's got the temper for it, too."

"You're forgettin' that he didn't have a reason to kill his wife," Janice said. "And you're leavin' out the headless man."

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Bo pretended to be hurt. "Who's the plotter here, you or me? You write the words, but I'm the one who comes up with the plot."

"Maybe so, but you're still leavin' all that out."

Franklin held up a hand. Obviously he didn't want to get started on the headless man again. "Why don't we get back to Tony, here, and see what he has to say. Before you came in, he was telling me about how he tried the back door of this house. Go over that again, Tony."

Tony twisted his hands together and began talking, but Bo wasn't really listening. He thought he had things pretty much worked out now. Gary Martin was a traveling salesman, after all, and while Bo knew better than to believe that most of the old jokes about the profession were true, there was a factual basis for them.

Salesmen spent a lot of time on the road, and now and then they had been known to stray from the straight and narrow, which was only to be expected. A man had certain urges.

But what about a man's wife? Bo knew all about the old double standard. What was all right for a man wasn't considered acceptable behavior for a woman.

The way Bo figured it, Betty Martin had been playing around with James Fischer while her husband was out of town. Gary had come home but hadn't announced himself for some reason or other. His wife heard him and called Fischer, who arrived too late. By the time he got there, Gary had confronted his wife about her affair and killed her.

Satisfied that he had the right answer, Bo motioned for Janice to follow him to the porch.

"All right if I smoke?" he asked when they were outside.

"Only if you stand far away from me," she said.

Bo put the pack of Camels back in his shirt pocket and explained his theory.

Janice agreed that Fischer and Betty Martin probably had a thing going. "Mrs. Teague practically admitted as much. But I don't think Mr. Martin killed his wife."

"Why not?"

"You're forgettin' about the man with no head."

"He doesn't exist. You know that. Everybody has a head."

"Not everybody," Janice said.

5.

They were in the Martins' kitchen. The table had a yellow Formica top and the chairs were made of tubular steel and had

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vinyl seats that were nearly the same color as the table top. Bo didn't want to sit in them. Vinyl made him sweat.

Janice was sitting in one chair, with Franklin, Martin, and Fischer in the other three.

"I still think it was the kid," Martin said. "He was lying, I know he was lying. He was in this house tonight. That's what Betty heard. I'm sure of it."

"I think you're wrong about that," Janice said. "That boy might be a burglar, probably *is* a burglar. But he didn't kill your wife."

"Who did, then?" Martin said. "And don't look at me like that. I certainly didn't kill her."

"Let Miss Langtry talk," Franklin said. "She's pretty smart about stuff like this."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Janice said. She blew her nose delicately into a tissue and continued. "Two things are the key to this puzzle—the telephone and the man with no head."

"That's the most ridiculous thing I ever heard," Fischer said, speaking for the first time. "That old woman across the street is crazy. She's a busybody, too, but mostly she's crazy. There's no such thing as a headless man."

"Maybe not," Janice said. "But there might be something that looked like a headless man. I saw something like that tonight."

"When?" Bo asked.

Everyone looked at him as if they'd forgotten he was in the room. Maybe they had.

"When you were running toward the porch right after we got here," Janice said. "You're like most men; you don't like to carry an umbrella, but you don't like getting your hair wet, either. So you pulled your jacket up over your head. From a distance on a dark night, you might look a little like a headless man."

Bo had to admit that she was right. But he didn't know what that proved. So he asked her.

"Nothin'. But the man Mrs. Teague saw was running in the direction of Mr. Fischer's house."

Fischer stood up. "I'm leaving now. I've heard enough of this."

Franklin put a heavy hand on his arm and pulled him back to his chair. "Sit down, Fischer. You're not going anywhere, not till Miss Langtry finishes talking. Go ahead, Miss Langtry."

"Well, I'm pretty sure that if we ask her the right way, Mrs. Teague will tell us that Mr. Fischer used to visit here a lot when Mr. Martin was out of town."

Bo grinned. He'd been right about that part.

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Martin didn't grin. He half jumped across the table, his hands reaching for Fischer, who shoved his chair away.

Franklin stood up and grabbed Martin's collar.

"Calm down," Franklin said.

Bo put his foot against the back of Fischer's chair and pushed it back to the table. Fischer's shoes squeaked on the slick floor.

Janice went on this time as if she hadn't even been interrupted. "The other thing was the telephone. I wondered why it had been wiped clean. A burglar wouldn't do that because a burglar wouldn't use the phone. But Mr. Fischer might."

"Now see here," Fischer said, standing again.

"I'm getting real tired of telling you to sit down," Franklin said.

"But why would I use the telephone here?" Fischer asked as he sat back in the chair. "If I had been here, that is."

"You'd use it to call your house," Janice said. "After you killed Mrs. Martin."

"But I didn't kill her!" Fischer said. "She called me and told me that there was someone in her house! I was the one who found the body!"

Bo got it then. "The perfect alibi! But what if you were the one who made the call? You could have lied about it, but you were afraid the police might be able to get the phone records and find out if there was really a call made from this number to yours. So you made sure there was. Of course, then you had to wipe your prints off the phone. By golly, Janice—"

Bo didn't get to finish the sentence. This time Martin made it all the way across the table and got his fingers locked around Fischer's neck. It took Bo and Franklin both to pry the fingers loose, and by the time they did Fischer was gagging desperately for air.

Franklin put handcuffs on Martin.

"What are you doing that for?" Bo asked. "Fischer's your headless man."

"Yeah," Franklin said. "Sort of. And Martin's going to make it for real if I don't do something about him." He looked at Janice. "That was pretty smart figuring."

"Thanks," Janice said, just before she sneezed.

6.

"Franklin was right," Bo told Janice as they drove toward her house. "That was pretty smart. I don't know why I didn't get it first, though."

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"You didn't see yourself running up to the porch with your jacket over your head."

"Right," Bo said, wishing he were convinced. "Do you think Fischer will confess? Franklin doesn't have any evidence. Just what you figured out."

"I wouldn't worry about that," Janice said. "Now that he knows who did it, Lieutenant Franklin will find the evidence. That wet jacket will be in Fischer's house, along with some wet shoes. Whatever clothes Fischer was wearin' will be there, too, and there might be blood on them. Even if he washed them, blood's hard to get out." She paused. "And then there's Tony."

"Tony?" Bo said.

"Sure. He was around that house at just about the time of the murder. You saw the way he was lookin' so shifty-eyed all the time. He knows somethin' he's not tellin'. I bet he saw Fischer leave. Or maybe he saw something while he was at the back door."

"What about a motive?" Bo asked. "That's going to be important at the trial."

"It shouldn't be hard to find one, either," Janice told him. "My guess is that Mrs. Martin was going to end the affair. Either that, or she was going to tell her husband about it. You saw what *he* was like. Fischer couldn't very well have let her tell. Lieutenant Franklin will get it out of him."

"You've really got it all figured," Bo said.

Janice just nodded, and they listened to the radio for a few minutes. Phil Phillips was singing Bo's current favorite slow song, "Sea of Love."

"I'd sure like to dance with you to that one," Bo told Janice.

"I've got a cold," Janice reminded him. "I don't feel like dancin'."

"I meant when you were feeling better."

"You smell like cigarettes."

Bo's heart sank. He loved smoking. He loved the taste of the smoke and the way it bit into his lungs. He loved the way it gave him something to do with his hands, and he loved the way the smoke hung in the air when he breathed it out into the room.

On the other hand . . . at least she hadn't said he was too short. There wasn't anything he could do about that.

"What if I quit?" he asked.

Janice looked out through the windshield.

"We'll see," she said. ●

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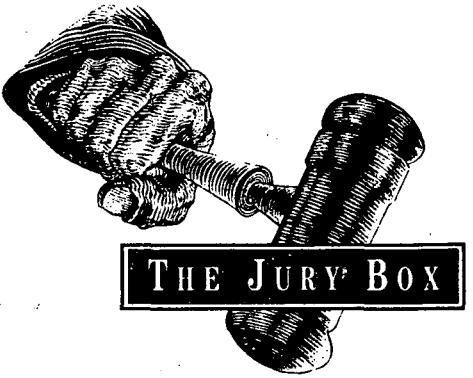

by Jon L. Breen

What has been the longest hiatus in a mystery series? Eighteen years passed between Lilian Jackson Braun's third Jim Qwilleran novel, *The Cat Who Turned On and Off* (1968), and the fourth, *The Cat Who Saw Red* (1986). William Campbell Gault's Brock (the Rock) Callahan took off nineteen years between *Dead Hero* (1963) and *The Bad Samaritan* (1982). A full twenty separated John W. Vandercook's second Bertram Lynch mystery, *Murder in Fiji* (1936), and the third, *Murder in Haiti* (1956). James Yaffe also let two decades go by between his last *EQMM* short story about a cop's armchair-detective mother, "Mom Remembers" (January 1968), and his first novel about the character, *A Nice Murder for Mom* (1988). Twenty-six years passed between Edmund Crispin's eighth Gervase Fen novel, *The Long Divorce* (1951) and the ninth and final, *Glimpses of the Moon* (1977), though a short story collection partially about the character, *Beware of the Trains,* was published in 1953. After *N or M* (1941), it took Agatha Christie twenty-seven years to return to Tuppence and Tommy Beresford in *By the Pricking of My Thumbs* (1968). The Beresfords may share the record with William Krasner's Sam Birge, who was idle for twenty-seven years between *The Stag Party* (1957) and *Death of a Minor Poet* (1984).

**** Edward D. Hoch: *The Ripper of Storyville and Other Ben Snow Tales,* Crippen & Landru, P.O. Box 9315, Norfolk, VA 23505; $16 trade paper, $40 signed limited hardcover. The career of Hoch's Old West detective was interrupted for nineteen years between his last *Saint Magazine* appearance in 1965 and his *EQMM* debut in 1984, so

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the first seven stories here, including the excellent title account of a 1901 New Orleans serial killer who may have been Jack the Ripper, will be new to many of this magazine's readers. Of the later stories, I especially liked "The Trail of the Bells" (*EQMM* April 1985), which combines the author's trademark fair-play puzzle plotting with a haunting insight into the masked villain Ben is after. Hoch contributes an informative introduction about the origin and development of the character—it's good to know why Ben's horse was named Oats—while Marvin Lachman provides two Snow chronologies, one by date of publication (1961-1997) and one by historical setting (1882-1935). The limited edition includes a separate pamphlet of the Hoch story "Five Rings in Reno" (*EQMM*, July 1976, as by R.L. Stevens), a splendid what-if mystery in which Arthur Conan Doyle comes to Reno to referee a 1910 heavyweight championship fight between Jack Johnson and Jim Jeffries.

*** Richard Stark: *Comeback,* Mysterious, $18. Not quite at record levels but a big event in the crime fiction world is the return of taciturn professional thief Parker, whose appearance in *Butcher's Moon* (1974) turns out not to have been his final caper after all. Though some characters age and change while on extended leave, most (like Parker) stay pretty much the same. The target of his caper this time is the takings of an Evangelist's crusade, and of course things go wrong, but in a less comic fashion than they would in the Dortmunder series the same author writes as Donald E. Westlake. Even readers who usually find professional crooks boring fictional subjects will appreciate Stark's skill and professionalism, though this does not rank with his very best.

*** Richard Forrest: *The Pied Piper of Death,* St. Martin's, $21.95. The eight-year break in the Lyon and Beatrice Wentworth series is short by comparison, but with a favorite series, it seems longer. Catalyst for a solid classical whodunit is a trendy topic, made more so by the death of Princess Diana: the campaign against landmines. Children's book writer Lyon and State Senator Bea attend a party at a munitions maker's estate. The intriguing puzzle involves historical delving (Civil War) and a family curse that will appeal to fans of Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles* and Herbert Brean's *Wilders Walk Away.*

*** Lindsey Davis: *A Dying Light in Corduba,* Mysterious, $23. I'm glad there have been no long breaks in the career of

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Ancient Roman sleuth Marcus Didius Falco, who this time travels with pregnant wife Helena to Baetica in Southern Spain to investigate skulduggery in the olive oil trade. The slangy first-person narrative makes any Falco book enjoyable, but Roman private eyes are seldom at their best out of Rome.

** Ira Levin: *Son of Rosemary,* Dutton, $22.95. I doubt any detective series can match the thirty year gap between the horror classic *Rosemary's Baby* (1967) and its sequel, in which Levin repeats himself for the first time. Was it a good idea? Not really. The story of Rosemary's reawakening from a decades-long coma to find her Satan-sired son hailed as a New Messiah is readable enough, and there are inside jokes for longtime fans of the author, but the whole gimmicky enterprise is unworthy of the original and the final twist is ludicrous. (The dedication to Mia Farrow and acknowledgement to Alad Ladd Jr. suggest this may be more a movie treatment than a novel, but I assume the recent report that Roman Polanski, who directed the 1968 film of *Rosemary's Baby,* has cut a deal to return to the United States is just a coincidence.)

Beginning a welcome new project to reprint in paperback the complete novels of Ngaio Marsh is her 1934 debut, *A Man Lay Dead* (St. Martin's, $5.50). The first case for Scotland Yard's Roderick Alleyn may lack the depth of characterization of later entries, but it has a dandy surprise solution in the best Golden Age tradition. The other three titles in the first group (and at the same price) are *Death in Ecstacy* (1936), *Artists in Crime* (1938), and *Death in a White Tie* (1938). These aren't really her first four books as the publisher claims, but they apparently were the first four to be published in the United States.

The most enjoyable book I've read since our last meeting is Leonard Maltin's anecdotal history of the network radio era, *The Great American Broadcast* (Dutton, $36.95). Of criminous interest are the recollections of Elliott Lewis and Lucille Fletcher, two mystery novelists who were prominent in radio, and multiple references to the old *Suspense* and *Whistler* series and such radio sleuths as Sam Spade and Johnny Dollar. It's so entertaining, I'll forgive Maltin's failure to mention my favorite radio mystery, *The Adventures of Ellery Queen.*

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The Tosca Dagger

by Robert Barnard

The six finalists in the Rio de Janeiro International Singer of the Year competition had all finished their programmes and were now engaged in backstage recriminations about who had slept with which of the judges. The judges themselves had been whisked by taxis away from the concert hall and were now ensconced in a private room leading off from the Hotel Bristol's restaurant and grill room. The judges were engaged in recriminations of their own.

"Well, darling, of course you thought he was wonderful," said Marianne Petrescu. "He's one of your pupils, which is the only reason why he got into the finals at all. Quite apart from any other claims he may have on your interest."

Greta Schwartz looked daggers and was about to speak when Louis Salve raised his hand.

"Let us 'ave—what you call it?—a moratorium on 'oo 'as slept with 'oo. It take too long."

They looked at each other.

"Are you suggesting we actually try to evaluate the contestants? Make artistic judgments?" asked Peter Lovejoy, languidly. "That *would* be revolutionary, and would certainly take a *very* long time."

His gaze went over to the table by the wall, and the gazes of all

This year two new novels by England's Robert Barnard will be published in the U.S. Under the author's pseudonym Bernard Bastable, Carroll & Graf will be bringing out *A Mansion and Its Murder;* and Scribner's will release its new book under the Barnard byline, *No Place of Safety.* Mr. Barnard's U.K. publisher also has one of his novels in the lineup, entitled *The Corpse at the Haworth Tandoori* (HarperCollins U.K.). ¶

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the other judges followed his. The management had left them to their deliberations, but had also left, to fuel them, a groaning display of king prawns, lobster, roast suckling pig, veal cutlets, gravlaks, cold capons, baked sea trout, dressed crab, and sundry local delicacies too numerous to mention. And also an impressive array of bottles, some of them in ice buckets and obviously just waiting to pop and foam.

"We eat," said Giuseppe Buoncini.

They ate. They took plates and they piled them high with the superb range of comestibles, mixing them indiscriminately in the manner of people with healthy appetites. Six of the judges were singers of present or past reputations, all of them used to fueling their energies, and of the other two, François Pollet, an administrator, was of a girth that testified that in that matter he was something of a singer manqué and enjoyed the culinary good things of life (though it must have made his second-favourite activity difficult and perhaps even perilous to the other person involved). Only Per-Olav Fremstad, a singers' agent, was reed slim, but that, going by his plate, was a result of bodily metabolism rather than abstemiousness.

"So here we still are with the problem of who to pick," drawled Peter Lovejoy. How he had become so effete in the no-nonsense, open-air atmosphere of his native New Zealand was a matter of wonder. "Shall we toss for it? Or shall we go for the audience's favourite?"

"No, no—we be more scientific than that," said Buoncini. "First we cut out Greta's pupil. Okay, okay, we done our duty by 'im—'e's not in the same class as the others, but as a favour to Greta we let 'im in. No further! That leaves five."

"If we do that," said Greta, in her horrible Bronx accent, "we exclude *all* students, not just mine." She looked pointedly at the only singer who had not spoken yet. "And that gets rid of the Swedish girl."

The singer was a large, handsome man in his late forties, with a head slightly too small for his body and an air of self-approbation which was undentable. He was in a sense the local boy—the only South American among the judges. His name was Antonio Valdez, and he was from Chile.

"I have no students," he said, in almost perfect English. "You are the only one here who has students, Greta, because your career is over—*quite* over. The Swedish girl—Swendson, is that

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the name?—came to me for advice one day when we were both in New York. We had one, maybe two—"

"Sessions?" spat out Marianne Petrescu. It was the first time she had addressed him during all the discussions over the previous six days of heats.

"Auditions, I would call them," he said coolly. "I heard her sing, I advised her on voice production, on technique."

"I'll bet you taught her a thing or two about technique," said François Pollet.

"Anyway, the question is academic. I would not support giving the Golden Laurel to Miss Swendson."

"Ah?" said Buoncini. "We make the advance! You are making a judgment."

"Clearly," agreed Valdez. "Not the Golden Laurel, perhaps not even the Silver. I would give the Gold to the Austrian and on balance the Silver to the Ukrainian tenor, whatever his unpronounceable name was. And let me say I have never given either of them a singing lesson and I have never slept with the Ukrainian."

"And there's not many in opera you could say *that* of, except the elephants in *Aida* and Brunhilde's horse," said Per-Olav Fremstad. Valdez looked complacent.

"I say again, let us not get on to our sexual 'abits," said Louis Salve. "Where would it all hend? Last night I see my dear friend Marianne Petrescu walking the streets of Rio, and I think, 'What is she after but a man to suit 'er tastes?' But what business is it of mine if he is a competitor or a male whore?"

"I was not looking for a man," said Marianne Petrescu, unruffled. "If I want a man, the Hotel Metropole where I stay has an infinite supply of young men who—judging by their inefficiency at everything else—are selected solely with a view to supplying the needs of single women who are guests at the hotel. Which, I may say, they are very willing to do."

"So, you were not looking for men," said Per-Olav Fremstad, frowning. "Nevertheless, you should not walk alone in the streets of Rio. It is your agent speaking. No woman should do that, and certainly not a famous opera singer."

And a profitable one, he might in honesty have added. Marianne smiled, a catlike smile.

"But I was not on my own," she said softly. "I had my trusty protector." She put down a bejewelled hand and began rummaging in her handbag on the floor. Suddenly she produced a lethal-looking

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stiletto which glinted threateningly in the harsh striplighting of Rio de Janeiro's Hotel Bristol. "My *Tosca* dagger."

"Verry convincing," said Buoncini. "Verry dangerous. But you need more than a stage dagger in Sout' America!"

Marianne shrugged.

"But I have no desire to kill a boy who only wants to grab my purse or my handbag. What would you have? You must have seen the poverty. In Romania when I was growing up everyone was poor. If I was poor like that today with rich people around me I would grab handbags, and I would be very good at it. So I take my beautiful stage dagger, a copy of a Borgia dagger, which has killed so many Scarpias."

"When I saw you as Tosca you used a knife from the dinner table," said Peter Lovejoy. Marianne Petrescu nodded complacently.

"Not for many years do I do that. I take my own little knife from my evening bag. *My* Tosca, you see, does not kill Scarpia on the spur of the moment. She comes prepared for everything."

Typical of a bloody operatic prima donna, thought Peter Lovejoy. Thinks she knows better than the composer and the librettist.

"So—we cut out the Swedish girl—*è vero?*" said Buoncini, getting back to the subject in hand and thus leaving uncanvassed the topic of what Marianne Petrescu was doing alone with a knife in the streets of Rio de Janeiro.

"Agreed, agreed, agreed," everyone murmured.

"Two down, four to go," said Peter Lovejoy.

"And the Italian is unthinkable," said Louis Salve. " 'E come just to be noticed by the managers. Sings four pop arias like 'e was at a Three Tenors concert. 'E will get 'is hengagements, but 'e no get the Laurel."

"Vulgar," said everyone, nodding as if they had never committed an artistic vulgarity in their lives.

"The public loved him," said Per-Olav wistfully.

"Then let him go and sing for them in the football stadium," said Valdez. "He is not an artist."

"Unlike some, who are artists before they are members of the human race," said Marianne Petrescu. Valdez smiled a catlike smile, as if he had been stroked. Marianne watched him for a moment with repulsion on her face, but was then distracted by a thought. "But that leaves only three, and one of them is the Hungarian. I don't like Hungarians."

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François Pollet exploded.

"God Almighty—what has that to do with anything? The French don't like the English, the Greeks don't like the Turks, Norwegians don't like the Swedes, the Belgians hate each other. So what? We forget that kind of thing, eh?"

"Agreed," said Peter Lovejoy in his tired drawl. "You should hear the sort of thing New Zealanders say about Australians. And you'd think we were both young countries, without the history behind us to get a good head of animosity going."

"Right—so are we all agreed?" asked Per-Olav. "We go on merit. We've got three finalists left: the Hungarian girl, the Ukrainian boy, and the Austrian."

"The Austrian has been screwing everything that moves," said Greta Schwartz. "He's like an automatic steam pistol. I suppose we have to forget that if we're leaving sex out of it."

"Except that people will say that's why he got it," said François Pollet. "To my knowledge, Greta and Marianne and Antonio have all had him—is that right?" They nodded, unembarrassed. "The talk among the competitors will be pretty poisonous."

"But in the competition he was equally strong in the lieder and on the operatic side," said Valdez. "He's the only one you could say that of. Ambidextrous vocally as well as sexually. I like that."

"You *would,"* spat Marianne.

"But if we think of *voice,* of the sheer *sound,"* said Louis Salve, who was a singer who had made his career out of sending shivers up susceptible spines by the quality of the sound alone, "then either of the other two would win hands down."

"But here, in this competition, we are surely talking about artistry," said Valdez.

Greta Schwartz shrugged. "The people who make beautiful sounds can go and sing Neapolitan songs in cafes. We are looking for a star singer, and that means we are in search of an artist."

"That means the Austrian," said Marianne. "Then we can simply vote on the other two for the Silver."

That seemed to meet with everyone's approval, and Per-Olav conducted the vote. Marianne voted determinedly for the Ukrainian, but the popular opinion went to the Hungarian woman. Marianne grimaced, but glancing down at her empty plate she decided it was time for second helpings, so she made no protest. She believed in getting her priorities right.

Everyone else followed her to the food.

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"I feel," said François Pollet, shovelling into his large mouth second helpings of smoked salmon, caviar, and Parma ham, "that we have made today an *artistic* decision. This is the first singing competition I've been at where that has been the case."

"Who is going to believe that his sexual prowess had nothing to do with it?" lamented Greta Schwartz. "In this case virtue is not its own reward. We chose him because he is the finest artist, and nobody will believe it."

Peter Lovejoy refrained from pointing out that she seemed to have misunderstood the saying about virtue being its own reward. Instead he said:

"In most singing competitions the judges are singers whose careers are in the past. They have their own students as competitors. They have their own hang-ups. A great Mimi of the sixties may not be pleased to see the next great Mimi of the nineties."

"I am not a singer whose career is in the past," rumbled Antonio Valdez.

"I meant this was the case in *other* singing competitions," said Lovejoy in his tiredest voice. "We have acted differently."

"And yet," said Marianne Petrescu, addressing Valdez directly almost for the first time, "you no longer sing Rigoletto, I believe, or di Luna. Too taxing. Too high. Can you still manage Giorgio Germont? I heard your line was going. Soon it will just be the odd Scarpia or Jack Rance in provincial houses, I would guess."

"You don't know what you're talking about, you venomous old bitch," shouted Valdez. "I was cheered to the rafters in *Così* at the Met last month."

"As Don Alfonso. The archetypal role for the baritone who no longer has much voice. No, there is no longer any career to speak of left. That is why I can now speak about that day, long in the past—"

"Oh, not that old business," groaned Valdez.

"Yes, that old business," said Marianne, pressing ahead with what was obviously going to be a performance of fire and power. "While you were singing great Rigolettos, great Iagos—*your* part, par excellence—then I could say nothing. For you were an artist, and that for me was sacred: Nothing should distract the public from your art, or rob them of great performances. But now I can talk about it—" she lowered her voice to a beautiful yet menacing pianissimo— "can tell the truth to my fellow artists, put you on symbolic trial, judge you, perhaps execute a sentence."

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"Crazy," said Valdez, stuffing himself with chicken leg with a distinct air of Laughton as Henry VIII.

"Not crazy. Inspired by the idea of justice." She certainly seemed to be buoyed up by something. "Justice delayed but unsleeping. Our careers have not overlapped often, have they? Managements know I will not sing with you—something these poor little singing competition organisers seem not to have understood. The last time we did—" the voice sank again, thrillingly— "was in Turin in nineteen sixty-eight."

Valdez seemed to have changed tack, swallowed his anger, and now was bent on treating Marianne as nothing but a joke.

"Ah yes, I remember it well," he sang, in the Chevalier manner.

"You were singing di Luna with the Turin company," said Marianne reflectively. "I was part of the visiting Bucharest Opera Company, performing Enescu's *Oedipe*—the last time any Romanian company went outside the Iron Curtain countries, because Ceaucescu was taking over, becoming paranoid, and soon the lights would go out and it was as if the whole country had been shut down."

"Spare us the history and the purple prose," sighed Valdez. Marianne considered, her face now more serious, less histrionic.

"The history is necessary. Very well—no more purple prose. This is a trial. Sober facts are best, and they condemn beyond anything that purple prose can achieve. So: The Turin company has an emergency. Their Leonora in *Trovatore* falls ill. In fact, she is drunk—drunk beyond performing, because she doesn't have the capacity of Jussi Bjorling. Could I sing the role? I can and I do—and the emissaries of the secret police of Romania stand in the wings, in the charming way that they had. At the end a splendid triumph—cheers, flowers, a stand-up ovation."

"She'd paid the claque," said Antonio Valdez.

"*That* is ridiculous," spat Marianne, eyes blazing. "Everyone knows touring artists from Eastern Europe never had any money. I could hardly *eat,* except on other people's charity, let alone pay the claque. . . . And after the triumph, a party. The grateful management of the company throws a party in my honour."

"It was a first night—naturally there was a party."

"And at the party, when I could shake off my rottweilers from the Securitate by going to the ladies' lavatory, there I am asked by the Director's secretary, waiting by arrangement—do I want to defect? We talk over running water, so the listeners outside do not

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hear. And I say yes, but it must be me and my lover, my only true lover, Mircea Dimitriu."

"Only true lover!" scoffed Valdez.

"Yes! Only true lover. Always there are others, but they are diversions. Nothing more. *Love* I only felt for him—for my best Scarpia, my Rigoletto, my Amonasro. Whose career in the West"—she glared at Valdez—"would have been *stupendous.* And she agrees, this Director's secretary, and she whispers, 'Hotel Albinoni, first floor, room one-oh-seven.' *Your room.*"

"My room," agreed Antonio Valdez. "Because it was on the first floor."

"Because it was on the first floor and offered opportunities to escape from the balcony if the Securitate discovered where I was and tried to break down the door. Especially as there was a little rope ladder attached to the bars of the balcony, for the convenience of your . . . lovers, let us call them."

"Ah, the vigour of youth!" exclaimed Valdez. Then he added: "How lucky I am to have retained it!"

"So, I have the key to room one-oh-seven, and poor Mircea has the key to room one twenty-four. Giovanna di Piero's room—she was too old to manage more than one flight of stairs, and the hotel had no lift. As the party draws to its climax, a phalanx of gesturing Italians forms around the Securitate men, Mircea and I slip out of the foyer, across the square, and to our separate rooms in the Hotel Albinoni."

"Where some time later I join you," said Valdez.

"Indeed yes," said Marianne, baring her teeth fearsomely. "And Mircea is joined by Giovanna di Piero, and Mircea and she cannot communicate, and he is bored and frightened, and silly, imprudent man, he goes towards the window. There on the Square are the Securitate men, and they see him. In a trice they are up the drainpipe, on the balcony, banging on the glass doors."

"And your brave Mircea is fleeing down the corridors for a new sanctuary."

"And banging on the door of one-oh-seven, begging, begging to be let in. And I try to get to the door, to open it to my beloved Mircea. But you hold me down—"

"—because I am coming to a climax, and it will be the most exciting climax of my life, and as the Securitate men run down the corridor and seize the screaming wretch at my door who thought

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he could be the world's next great baritone, I come in the most delicious, the most thrilling way possible."

There was silence in the room. No one was even eating.

"What can one say about such a man?" asked Marianne Petrescu, looking around. No one could think of a word. He was a skunk, even by operatic standards. "My Mircea is bundled onto the Balkan-Air plane, back to Bucharest, to prison, to singing small roles in provincial houses, to early death. I have to stay that whole terrible night with this monster, in room one-oh-seven. And I have to stay quiet about why I never, never will again sing with him, never come near him."

"Till now," said François Pollet.

"Till now. When his career is over. When we can have a symbolic trial—and execution."

Antonio Valdez stood up and opened his jacket.

"Oh—how I remember that night! It was worth it. Well worth a symbolic trial and a symbolic execution. *Tosca, finalmente mia!*"

Marianne grabbed the knife and lunged across the table.

"Muori dannato! Muori! Muori!"

The knife went in through the ribs, blood spurted through the dazzling white of the shirt front, and he staggered back.

"Dio mio!" shrieked Marianne, with a ham theatricality that seemed designed to taunt the dying man. "It was the real knife! Not the Tosca dagger but the real one!"

Ten minutes later, as the body was surrounded by waiters and they all awaited the arrival of the Rio police, Per-Olav Fremstad sat with Marianne in a corner of the private dining room, she still emitting hysterical screams amid intervals of sobbing.

"I never saw you use that dagger," he whispered to her. "In all my years as your agent."

"I never said it was to be a mock execution," she said, looking up at him with sly triumph. "While I was out looking for him to kill him the other night I thought of a better way. I called it my *Tosca* dagger because it was the instrument of a mock execution that turned out not to be a mock one at all, but a real one. *Tosca* Act Three, not *Tosca* Act Two. ●

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Art by Mark Evan Walker

RIEN NE VA PLUS

by Raymond Steiber

They'd beaten him up pretty good this time. So good, in fact, that the taxi driver he'd flagged hadn't wanted to stop for him. A guy looking like that, stumbling out of the dark, his face a mess, his jacket ripped and filthy—who knew what you were picking up? But then halfway down the block some quirk of conscience had caused the cabbie to slam on his brakes and back up full speed and come to a rocking stop where Harry stood hunched at the curb, trying to breathe through his broken mouth.

The cabbie had to get out and help him into the backseat. He sprawled there, screwing up his face at every breath because of the way his ribs hurt him. Safe, he thought. Made it to a cab. Even still got my money.

The cabbie put the car in gear and they took off. After a minute Harry thought to ask where he was being taken. "Hospital," the cabbie said over his shoulder. "Where did you think?"

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"No. No hospital." He was scared to death of hospitals. Hospitals were where they took you to die. That's what his old man had always said, and when they'd finally dragged him there, his bird-like eyes as full of fear as if he were being taken to his execution, he'd proved the point by never coming out again.

"Hey, man, you *need* a hospital. What happened to you anyway? You get mugged?"

Swindlers have always found gambling casinos a natural home, especially in fiction, but in his new story for *EQMM* Raymond Steiber gives us a look at a kind of con that hardly seems cheating at all—unless you happen to be a casino owner . . .

"Yeah. Mugged." That'd do as good as anything. "Look, take me to my girlfriend's place."

"Where the hell's that?"

Yeah, where *was* it? Wasn't his girlfriend anyway, and given her trade, the cabbie'd probably figure that out the moment he saw her. Las Vegas cabbies knew all about babes like her. He fished her address out of his memory anyway. He'd helped her out a few times, maybe now she could help him.

When they pulled up in front of the apartment building, there was a light on in her window. But all that might mean was that she had a client up there. The cabbie helped him up the breezeway steps and then pushed the doorbell for him.

Things started tilting around on him. He had to lean against the wall to keep from going to his knees. Then the door opened on its chain and Rita was there. She was dressed for work, which meant that she was barely dressed at all.

"Oh, I thought you were my—" Her hand went to her mouth. "My God, Harry, is that you?"

"Give this guy a twenty, Rita. I'll pay you back soon's I get inside."

He might have crumpled then. He seemed to remember being down and leaning against Rita's black-stockinged legs. And then the cabbie grabbing him and the two of them—the cab driver and Rita—steering him into the living room and lowering him onto the sofa. He closed his eyes, and when he opened them again the cabbie was gone and Rita was swabbing his face with something that stung.

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"Money's in my money belt," he whispered. "They didn't take it. Took my wallet, though—the bastards."

"Harry, what happened?"

"They caught me counting cards at the Slipper. The manager decided I needed a lesson."

"Don't you know that place is still run by the Mob?"

"Other places would've done the same. Maybe not the beating. Maybe just run me out the door with my arm shoved up behind my back and bang me off the side of a parked car or two. They don't like card counters in this town. They don't like guys smart enough to beat them. Am I making sense?"

"Not much. Harry, I think I need to get you to a hospital. I think you got a couple of cracked ribs, maybe worse."

"No—I don't like hospitals. They check you in and never check you out."

"Just the emergency room. Then I'll bring you back here. I promise. I already had to call a client and cancel a date. Don't die on me here and make this a *really* bad night."

She threw on a coat and got him out to her car. Car, he thought. His was still in the parking lot at the Slipper. He'd have to get it picked up before they figured that out and trashed it.

He wasn't actually bleeding to death so they had to sit around at the ER. The male paramedics kept shooting looks at Rita's legs as they passed. Maybe it was the black net stockings. Rita ignored them. She could turn it on for a client all right, but everybody else was strictly a punter.

Eventually they got around to him. Then he had to wait for X-rays and then he had to wait for a doctor.

The young doc said: "You were lucky, you only got bruised ribs. But I want to see you back here in the morning. There's another physician here who needs to take a look at these X-rays."

Like hell, he thought. Escaping you guys is like escaping the grim reaper and I'm not coming back.

He gave the front desk Rita's phone number and, all pilled out and taped up, went back with her to her apartment.

She put him in the back bedroom. By then he was barely able to move, but he managed to get his money belt off and cram a couple of hundreds in her hand.

"What's this for?"

"I'm putting a dent in your commercial life."

"We'll talk about that in the morning."

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She turned off the light. He couldn't lie flat on the bed because it hurt too much to breathe that way. So he sat up with the pillows puffed up behind him. The combination of the pills and the beating soon had him in a semi-slumbrous daze. But that wasn't much good either because he kept dreaming about what'd happened to him—the dead-end street with the empty lot at the end of it and the two men who had taken him there—the big blond kid with the close-cropped hair and the guy with the moustache and the earring. They hadn't said a word while they'd done it. It had just been a cold, methodical, thoroughly professional ass-kicking. The blows that'd hurt the most were the ones he hadn't seen coming, that he couldn't prepare for, and after a while they had all been like that. Things had begun to rattle loose from his brain—hallucinations, snatches of the past. At one point the croupier from a Deauville, France, casino he'd once been in had seemed to swim before his eyes. The croupier had cold-eyed him and told him to place no more bets—they did that just before they spun the roulette wheel. But maybe that'd been the guy with the earring telling him that. Or next time they wouldn't stop with a beating.

He woke-slept, slept-woke through the night, the inside of his mouth feeling as though it were stuffed with cotton balls. The first thing he saw when daylight came was a mounted photograph on the dresser beyond the foot of the bed. It was a picture of an eight- or ten-year-old girl, the kind they take at a mall photo shop.

He thought: You're keeping bad company, kid. A gambler and a professional lady. Somebody ought to tell your mother.

A couple of hours later Rita came in with a tray. It was morning her time, near noon everybody else's. She fed him coffee and orange juice—his mouth was too sore for anything else—and then got a couple of fresh pills in him.

He nodded toward the photograph. "Who's that?"

"My daughter. She lives with my mother in Sacramento."

"How come you keep it in here?"

"You know who comes in my bedroom—you think I'd keep it in there? Look, Harry, we got to talk about you being here. It's okay—you know I won't kick you out. But I'm a working girl. I've got to have clients to feed the cat."

"So what do you want me to do?"

"I want you to stay quiet while you're here, that's all. It's all right if I moan a little, but they sure won't want to hear you moaning."

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"Okay, I get the picture. Hey, I just noticed. You let your hair go dark again."

"I got tired of being a blond, so I went back to being a brunette."

"You look good that way. Sort of sultry."

"And you look like royal hell, Harry. They really worked you over."

"I'm like you. I got to make a living. And card counting's the way I do it."

"They'll kill you one of these days."

"What am I doing that isn't fair?"

"What do they care about fair? They only care about the edge they got. And guys like you who can remember what's been dealt and what's still in the shoe take that edge away."

"Do I use a calculator? Have I got any cards up my sleeve? The only thing I bring to the table is my brain."

"I think you like it, Harry. I think you like the extra risk."

"If I couldn't stand the risk, Rita, I'd've been in some nine-to-five job years ago, counting the days to my pension. And then it helps that I'm good at it."

That was the trick in life, he thought after she'd left with the tray. To find what you were good at and go for it. The thing that gave you back something, and not just money, instead of always taking away. Taking away hours of your life and giving back tedium, taking away your nerve and spirit. That was most people's story, all right. But it hadn't been his.

He'd known what he wanted from the first roll of the dice. He'd been no good at school, no good at athletics, even his old man had thought he was pretty worthless—but then his old man had had tough standards, the kind that even if you met them you couldn't meet them. But gambling—somehow when it came to cards or dice he saw better than other people did. Things slowed up for him and took a deeper perspective, the way a pitched ball will for a great hitter so he can look it over on its way to the plate. And as for odds, he could quote you the odds on anything, any roll of the dice or flip of the cards. Part of that was simply experience, but the rest was a quick brain and a sure instinct. He knew how to gamble, all right. He knew how to get up for it and then husband his energy through a long night. He was a natural.

He slept through the afternoon. The hospital called a couple of times, once while Rita had a client visiting. That didn't make her

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too happy, and she was even less happy when he told her to give them a song and dance.

He managed scrambled eggs that evening and bread and butter and a glass of juice. The night wasn't any better though. The two guys kept beating on him in his dreams, and even the Deauville croupier showed up for an encore. In the morning the hospital called again. And this time they told Rita something she couldn't ignore.

She sat down on the bed beside him, and he was recovered enough to notice how good she looked even without much makeup.

"That was the hospital," she said.

"Did you tell them to get lost?"

"Harry, they found something in your X-rays besides messed-up ribs."

The doc who saw him was an older guy. Over the years he'd probably told a lot of people what he was telling Harry now. He must've learned that the best way to handle it was to give the person the straight dope and then tell them how they intended to fight it. They'd kept him overnight and run a bunch of tests on him, and all the time the needles and the barium enemas had been going in he'd thought about his old man—how you could see the fear in his eyes when it'd happened to him—and wondered if you could see the same thing now in his.

The doc showed him everything, X-rays, scans they'd done, lab results, and told him how it was all through his system now and that they couldn't get at it with a knife. In a way that was a relief. Surgeons cutting on you, taking out parts of you, never putting them back—who needed that?

"So what's it come down to, Doc?"

"We can try chemotherapy. I won't kid you about what that's like. Each session is going to knock you out. You'll lose hair and you'll lose weight. In many cases chemotherapy can give you as much as an eighty percent chance of survival. This isn't one of them, but it will give you some chance."

"This isn't good news, Doc."

"It's the best I have to offer."

He could feel the walls of this place closing in on him, the doors shutting and locking. But what choice did he have? "Let's go ahead with it," he said.

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After the first treatment he moved into a hotel room on the Strip, an efficiency with a kitchenette. He had enough money to see himself through this thing, but just enough. Afterwards, if there was an afterwards, he'd have to go out and rebuild his stake.

The chemo was a lot more complicated than he'd thought it would be. The veins in his arms began to look like they belonged to a junkie and not a square gambler whose only poison was alcohol. The doc told him that there'd come a time when the veins wouldn't be usable anymore, when they'd have to install a shunt. As it was, his arms were all black and blue, and if a narc had caught him in a washroom with his sleeves rolled up, he would've run him in for sure.

The chemo really knocked him out, or maybe it was the stuff the chemo was fighting. He spent a lot of time lying in bed, trying to keep his food down and watching bum talk shows on the room TV. Rita visited him sometimes. Lately the daylight seemed to be doing things to Rita. It washed her out somehow and made her good looks seem dull. Or maybe it was just him and everything that was happening to him.

He asked her once, "That girl of yours, what's her name?"

"Julie—after my mother."

"She know what you do here in Vegas?"

"No—and if anybody ever tells her I'll slit their throat for them."

"That must be something—having a kid, I mean. Taking care of her."

"I hardly ever see her, Harry." And then she said, "Dammit," and stuck a handkerchief in her face. "This ain't anything I want to talk about, Harry."

"Yeah. Right. Should've kept my mouth shut."

"It ain't like you think. Like I feel I'm neglecting her and my heart's bleeding or something. It's just the way your life gets all screwed up—how it's not ever the way you want it."

He patted her back. "Yeah. Sure. That's the way it is, all right."

But after she left he thought how his life had gone just about how it should've. He'd been married once and messed that up, but that was the only big regret. And there'd been plenty of other women to compensate. When he was a kid, just starting out, they'd always been older than him—waitresses in all-night eateries, female bartenders. When daylight came, you always noticed the crow's feet around their eyes and the lines at the corners of their mouths. But maybe they had those because they worked the

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wrong side of the day—the night side—and unless you were born to it, as he'd been born to it, it tended to wear you down.

He thought about all the all-night poker games he'd been in. He remembered one in El Paso when he couldn't have been more than twenty, going bust and having to sign his car away to a big Texan. The site of the game had been somewhat out of town, and the Texan had slipped him a five for cab fare. But he'd walked anyway, just so he'd have some money, and slept in the backseat of a car he'd found unlocked. Then he'd washed up in a service station and found a backroom crap game and over the course of an afternoon slowly built up a stake so he could get back in the poker game. It had still been going on when he got there. It had been going on for days in an atmosphere of drifting cigarette smoke and excluded sunlight. And by the time it finally broke up the next morning he'd come out a solid winner.

He'd gone bust lots of other times and made small fortunes. He'd switched from poker and dice as his bread-and-butter games to blackjack. He'd lived high and risky and had no regrets. And here was the thing of it: He wanted it to go on—as that poker game had gone on—and never stop.

The treatments at the hospital continued. At first he felt like he was fighting this thing, playing a bad hand for all it was worth and slowly drawing enough good cards to make a stand. Then little by little the face he saw in the mirror began to tell him that he was losing ground. The lost hair—he could fight that. But the shrinking of his skin, the way it seemed to have gone parchment yellow, the blue-black pouches under his eyes. He wanted to shout, Hey, I'm only forty-five! It's too early for this! You owe me what everybody else gets! *Yeah,* his image seemed to mock him, *and this is it.*

And so when the door finally clicked shut and the old doc turned and told him, it really came as no surprise. A shock, yeah, a punch in the gut as if that guy with the earring had been at him again, but, well, he didn't fall apart or anything, he didn't come unglued. Little quaver in the voice, that was all, a weakness in the knees, but holding it all together, facing it clear-eyed.

"We could continue the chemo," the doc said, "but at this point all we'd be accomplishing is to cause you a lot of pain and misery."

"Uh-huh, uh-huh."

"Fairly soon you're going to need full-time care."

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"Uh-huh, uh-huh."

"That means checking in here or maybe a hospice if we can find one for you. You need to start thinking about things like the conditions under which you'll want life support withdrawn."

"Phew. Wow. I mean, I'm taking this in, I'm handling it, but it's leaving me a little lightheaded—you know?"

"We have people you can talk to here in the hospital—counselors . . ."

"No, no, none of that stuff. Those people are like vultures, undertakers. I want to hold on to the light a little longer. I want to go out looking at it. What's the time frame here? When does it happen?"

"I can't say, Harry. Nobody can say. Not long."

"Then do this for me, do this. Write me up a prescription for enough pain pills to handle the worst. And then, well, maybe a few more."

The old doc looked at him a moment with his face set. Then he got out his prescription pad.

"If they give you any trouble at the pharmacy, have them call me."

"Did you write for enough, Doc?"

"I wrote for plenty, Harry."

He lived on the pills and the pills put him in a dark fuzzy world where the only light came from the TV set. He ate sparingly—eggs mainly, scrambled eggs when he could keep them down, sometimes a little something from room service. Soft foods, bland foods. And then dig your fingers into the mattress and wait for the nausea to pass, and when it had, when there was a clammy film of sweat left behind on your forehead, maybe feel a little better for a while—at peace, put it that way, on the other side of one more ordeal. But scared, too, really scared for the first time in his life. As if he were edging along a cliff face and the ledge was becoming narrower and narrower and he couldn't turn around, *he couldn't go back,* he could only go forward toward the inevitable fall.

A week passed, maybe ten days, he didn't keep track anymore. Then one day he looked at himself in the mirror, *really looked,* and saw how close he must be to the end. He was pretty well pilled up at the time, and a ghastly grin split his face. Who'd recognize me now? he thought. Even that guy with the earring wouldn't know me.

And that was when he decided to have one last shot at them. To

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walk right into their lair, into the Slipper, and sit down at the blackjack table and make a run. Give 'em one in the eye—sure, that was it—and go out one last time feeling like a winner.

But do I have the stamina for it? he wondered. Can I pull it out of my gut one more time? And then he thought: Only one way to find out.

He got a couple of decks of cards out of his luggage. Then he began to deal the way a blackjack dealer would. And as the cards drifted onto the coffee table in individual hands, he kept track of what was showing, what was not, using little mnemonic prompts to help him, taps on the knee mostly, locking it all in. Pretty soon he was playing three games at once, two in his head—the last one and the next one—plus the game that was actually transpiring in front of him.

He'd learned how to do it from a college kid. They were the ones who'd invented it—guys who were a little flakey but had a good head for numbers. He'd sat in on a game with the kid and figured out that he was doing something but didn't know what it was. Afterwards he'd bought the kid a few drinks, and when he'd gotten him well oiled, offered him some loot to show him what his game was. And the kid had taught him, not for the money, but just so he could finally brag to somebody. He'd shown Harry how to prepare, too, how to get his head in order. Because card counting wasn't like poker or anything like that. It was like driving a truck straight through from St. Louis to L.A., no stops, no pit calls, and facing a dozen different kinds of weather on the way. And no letup on the gas pedal either, just flat out for the distance. And the other thing was that somebody'd torn down all the road markers and street signs and you had to remember them as you went along. Oh, it took some kind of concentration, all right, but when had he not been able to focus on a card game?

After an hour he felt like he could still do it. A little shake in the hand maybe, but what did that matter? Wouldn't be him who was dealing. Question was, how long could he keep it up? Long enough to make a run? Long enough to walk off a winner? Because card counting didn't guarantee that. It simply guaranteed the chance of it.

He forced some food down. He took a shower, knees shaking, stomach a little fluttery. He shaved away three days' growth of beard, nicking himself in the process. Baby powder to stop the bleeding, then some more to cover the blue-black pouches under

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his eyes. He dressed very carefully. His clothes hung on him, his collar looked a mile too wide. So what? he thought. They'll think I'm some seventy-year-old punter from Peoria and leave me alone. Although the Quad Cities had some pretty nice gambling, now that he thought about it.

He got to the elevator and almost swooned as the floor dropped beneath his feet. But then he got out into the night air and into a taxi and felt okay again. People, people in action, lights, movement. He'd been cutting himself off from all that and now here it came again and it was like a shot in the arm—*great!* Life was out here in the streets, life in the casinos, while that hotel room was just an anteroom for the grim reaper.

He thought of Rita. He wished she were here, all dolled up and clinging to his arm. Ready to swing through the night amid all the lights and action. Sure—grab it! Grab life with both hands while it was still there for you.

When he got to the Slipper, he had a drink at the bar. The drink sort of sucker-punched him, and there was a moment of swaying blackness when he stood up again. Then he steadied himself and made his way past the keno board and the slots and into the pit, the area of green-felt gaming tables. Little weak, little lightheaded, but once he shook himself, once he sat down at the blackjack table, ready to go.

He caught a glimpse of the big blond kid. Circulating, keeping an eye on things, ready to use a little discreet muscle if anyone got out of hand. But the kid paid no attention to him, and he knew that he was in.

Three other players at the table plus the white-shirted, string-tied dealer, stone-faced, polite, voice just loud enough to be heard by the players, a real mechanic. Here came the first deal, and just like that everything disappeared but the table and the cards, the green-felt arena of play.

First few hands were start-up hands. He began keeping track of the cards, learning what was in the shoe. He was a bit tense at first, but then he got into the swing of it, worked out the rhythm of the game. In blackjack each player played individually against the dealer, and the usual strategy was to make a note of the opponent's face card and then try to figure what else he was holding from the way he played. Twenty-one was the winner. Any count of cards over twenty-one and you lost the game. So if the dealer was showing a ten or a face card and standing pat, then you knew he

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had at least a seventeen. That meant that you just about had to have a natural to beat him, a twenty or twenty-one. If you were holding low, you could maybe draw to the natural by hitting for another card. But the odds were not good, and you just might bust twenty-one and lose anyway. That was where card counting came in. You could see what cards were faceup on the table. That took them out of the game, they couldn't be dealt to you. And if you'd been paying attention, you knew what cards had gone faceup back into the shoe after the last deal. You couldn't be dealt those either because there was no reshuffle between hands, no reshuffle, in fact, until a card from a previous game showed face up at the business end of the shoe. So more and more as the game went on, you knew *exactly* what was available to be dealt, you knew because you'd *counted* the cards. And if you knew that, you knew the odds of any single card being dealt to you in the draw. Which meant that suddenly you had an edge on the house. It wasn't their game anymore, it was *your* game, and simply by closing out when the odds were against you and drawing when they weren't, you guaranteed yourself a successful night.

The trouble was that the casinos had learned to spot card counters from the way they played. And once they were sure, they took your photograph for future reference and ran you off. And the Nevada courts had even backed them up. Sure, you didn't bring anything to the game but your brains, but as far as the casinos were concerned that was already too much. Well, let them come for him tonight. What were they going to do—kill him?

Blip-blip-blip. The calculator in his mind slowly got control of the game. He lost some, sure, particularly on the reshuffles, but little by little he began to build up the chips, making sure bets because he could *see* what the dealer was holding, *see* what was still in the shoe. The dealer started cold-eyeing him. Nothing impolite, just a quickening of interest. He'd been warned about card counters, all right. He'd been warned plenty.

The pit boss drifted over and tried to distract him with his stare. And when that didn't work, he even switched dealers to upset his rhythm. But they could forget that. What did they think he was—an amateur? And on the walkway overhead, the other side of the one-way ceiling mirror, the eyes were on him, too. In his present state it was all he could do to keep from tipping them a wink.

The game went on. He lost, won, won, won, lost, won, won. The chips built up, they became a substantial pile. Out of the corner of

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his eye he spotted the guy with the moustache and the earring. The pit boss drifted over to him and held a low conversation. The guy looked at him, shook his head, looked again. Harry felt like grinning and shooting him the finger.

It was all going great, it was all going perfectly. The game was his, it was an extension of his mind. Then just like that he began to lose it. It happened all at once over the course of a hand. The bottom just seemed to drop out and his vision got fuzzy. The background buzz of voices, the clangor of the slots, turned into a kind of pulsing white noise. He managed to throw in his hand, losing small, and then just hung there as a terrible blackness swam before his eyes.

"You all right?" somebody asked.

His eyes went wide but still didn't seem able to focus. "What? Yeah, sure. Just need some air."

He began scooping up his chips, stuffing them in his pockets. Some of them spilled on the floor. A cocktail waitress bent down and picked them up for him. He let her keep them, weren't that many anyway. Then he left a hundred-dollar chip on the table for the dealer. Sure, go out flush. Let them tell the story. How on that last night Harry had left a winner.

He weaved away from the table, white and trembling. The drink he'd sloshed down, the food he'd scarfed, it was all beginning to work its way up again. Got to get to the men's room, he thought, but how he ever made it he didn't know. One moment he was crossing the endless acres of the casino floor and the next he was slumped over a sink and the sink was a stinking mess. He ran water to wash it away. Then he splashed some of the water in his face. He straightened up and saw himself in the mirror, dead white skin and a gaping mouth. Then he slid sideways and only saved himself from going to the floor by gripping the next sink.

What is this? What is this? I'm not in control anymore. Is this the way it ends? In a stinking men's room, sprawled on the floor like some drunk? No. *No way.*

He stumbled out the door and found himself opposite the reception desk. All those chips in his pockets were unbalancing him. He needed to get rid of them. He weaved to the desk. The clerk looked up.

"You got a big padded envelope back there? Big padded envelope and a lotta stamps?"

He got out a chip and slapped it down on the counter, didn't

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even bother to check the denomination. The clerk got him the stamps and the envelope.

Harry fumbled around. "Pen," he croaked.

The clerk got him that, too.

He stuffed all the chips in the envelope, managed to gum down the flap with a dry tongue. Then with exaggerated care he wrote Rita's name and address on the outside. Should've put a message inside, he thought. Hell with it. Put it on the outside. He began scribbling on the back of the envelope. *Blow it on*—he couldn't remember the name she'd told him—*Blow it on your kid.*

He slid away from the counter. Mail slot around here somewhere, but where? Then he saw the guy with the moustache and the earring, he saw the blond kid. They'd tipped to him at last. And now they'd come looking for him.

He turned awkwardly, almost falling in the process, and there right in front of him was the mail slot. He jammed the envelope into it, shoved it through, all the time fighting the blackness, all the time trying to stay on his feet. *Did that, anyway.* Then turned back again and gave the bastards a ghastly grin. They saw him now. They came for him. But the blackness got there first, and all at once he was on the carpet, didn't even know how he'd got there, and people were bending over him and somebody was telling the desk clerk to call a doctor.

Cold. Getting cold. Must be hemorrhaging or something. The world moved back a step. Everything went gray and foggy. He saw a big black wave coming, slowly, majestically. It swept beneath him and lifted him up. As it carried him away into the darkness, he heard once more the sepulchral voice of that Deauville croupier. *Rien ne va plus.*

Place no more bets. ●

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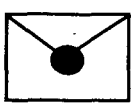

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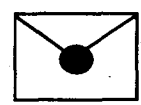

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Poetic Justice

by Marie E. Truitt

At the foot of the stair lay a corpse sprawled out flat
From vigor to "rigor" . . . . . as simple as that!
Arms . . . legs . . . all askew . . . complete loss of face . . .
With mortal coil shucked off all over the place.
The first thought that hit me, 'tis sad to confess:
"My beautiful carpet! One God-awful mess!"
Just one week today my toe caught that same tread;
But for whimsical Fate, I might be the one dead.
Hundreds of mates have thusly up-ended;
So I tread very gingerly. No pun intended!
I don't see how *I* could come under suspicion.
An un-nailed-down tread's more a sin of omission.
No need to feel guilty or fraught with contrition.
The seed was scarce planted, when–Whoosh! Full fruition!
In this case, our accident's pure retribution;
A drip in the bucket 'gainst rank persecution.
As a species, the nagger . . . proud beast of distinction . . .
Is not just endangered! It's doomed to extinction!
These are the days of complete liberation,
And *this* household's got it without reservation!
Love! Honor! Obey! Sounds so storybook sweet!
I never imagined it spelled ONE-WAY STREET!
I loved. And *I* honored. Tried hard to obey,
As I mopped and I shopped and I played house all day,
While the family "bread-winner," in splendid array,
Sped off in the Porsche for a . . . drab . . . business day.
Old Mrs. Fitzhue, my next-door "hot-line,"

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Says, "It's one-tenth real business!
Nine-tenths monkey-shine!"
I might be a shnook, I'm the first to admit.
But even at worst, not a total dim-wit!
So the Fitzhue news flash was a hot-line "has-been."
On a scale of enlightenment . . . . hardly a "10!!"
Even we doormats, upon rare occasion,
Have flashes of insight and sheer revelation.
Now, let's simmer down! Mustn't lose our aplomb!
Ha! Ha! Simmer down?! I'm one step from "Ho-Hum!"
My squeaky-clean mind-set gets more of a buzz
When my ankle-deep carpet is marred by a fuzz.
And speaking of fuzz . . . I'll just quickly hop-to
And share this misfortune with our fine lads in blue.
Just think of the onslaught of dirt-footed troops!
Policemen! And medics! And neighborhood snoops!
That's the least of my worries. A small price to pay
For a decade of bondage now blown clear away.
I'd best set the mood . . . one of stunned disbelief!
Some ill-concealed teardrops! Genteel show of grief!
Best run through the script. There'll be questions,
no doubt.
"I was out in the kitchen, just puttering about. . . .
I'd finished the dishes. Now. . . . let me just think. . . .
Was I next to the fridge! . . . . Or still there by the sink!"
(Wee bit of confusion. . . . Nice touch, seems to me.)
"When I heard this loud noise, and . . ."
. . . . My gosh! It can't be!
The doorbell!! So soon!! These cops sure drive hell-bent!
"Oh! Officers! . : . . It's . . . . (sob!!!) . . . . my wife! . . .
Accident!"

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NEXT ISSUE...

The Scream
DOROTHY SALISBURY DAVIS

How Far It Could Go
LAWRENCE BLOCK

The Serpent's Back
IAN RANKIN

Song Without Sound
BATYA SWIFT YASGUR

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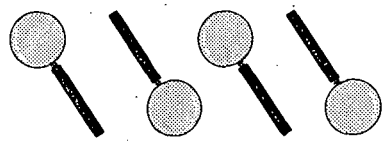

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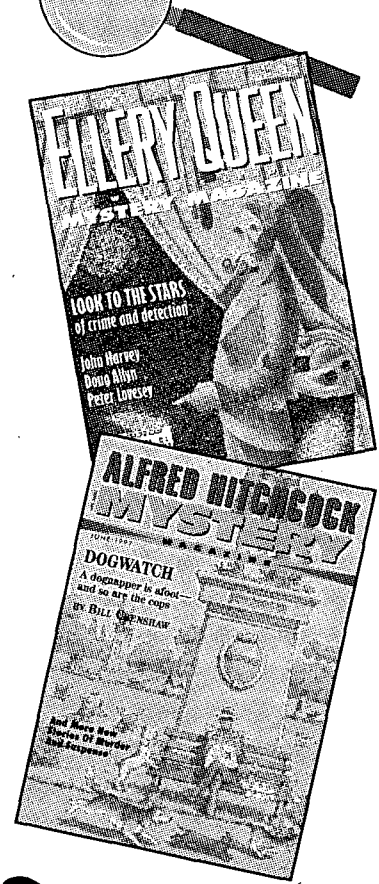

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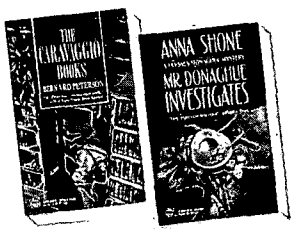

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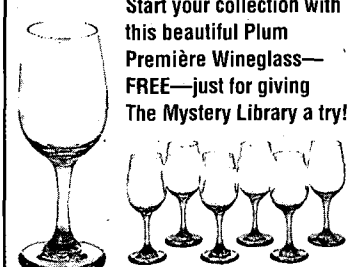

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